Starcaller
FANTASY
03
JOE TAKEDUKI
« ILLUST. »
SHIRABII
INBOUND
03
Asura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII
"RUDRA"

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ıra-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII

All PRAJNA Running System
Now Booting,

Spellbook
"PRAJNA HEART SUTRA"

Gate Gate Paragate
Parasamgate
Bodhi Svaha

Mantra Server Startup Complete.

TERMINOLOGY

— THE AVALO SATELLITE —

Full name: Avalokiteśvara. A solar furnace-powered, manned satellite in orbit above the Earth’s equator. Onboard is the Astral Library, a complete archive of the Gospel Code that the Asura Frames use to produce feats of magic. With this spacecraft’s aid, the abilities of both the Asuras and nano-augmented are greatly enhanced.

— REPLICANTS —

Clone copies of the last kings and queens of the elvish dynasties of old. The four bloodlines were of wind, earth, fire, and water. Similarly, there are four Replicants, each bestowed nanomachines upon their birth and gifted with great aptitude.

— AL’IKSIR —

A floating city modeled exactly the same as the settlement in the waters of Kansai, Nayuta. Designed to be completely self-sufficient, the artificial community also serves as a site for research on advanced, zero-emissions technology.

— THE ASURA FRAME MARK IV: MITRA —

Currently deployed in Korea, the Mark IV Frame functions primarily as a vanguard for land offensives. Its Devicer is Choi Taeyang, but most simply know him by his given name, Taeyang, which also doubles as his stage name.

— THE ASURA FRAME MARK V: VARUNA —

The Asura Frame of the sea, currently belonging to the Chinese military, is worn by Lieutenant Commander Zhou Xueli of the navy.

— THE ASURA FRAME MARK VII: AGNI —

Status and Devicer whereabouts: unknown. The Mark VII is unique among the Asura series for being the first to make use of the revolutionary Photon-Frame.

— THE ASURA FRAME MARK VIII: SOMA —

Said to be the most magically capable of all the Asura series. It’s remained dormant for some time, however, and has shown no signs of waking. It currently has no Devicer.

Prologue

Flames engulfed him, tongues of fire dancing over both the archmage's burly form and resplendent blue garb. A very strange boy had loosed them upon Quldald of the Whirlwind—an odd warrior by Earthling standards, at least. Devicer Seven, he had called himself. He was a terribly gaunt boy, but from his bony hands he could create powerful explosions, as well as waves of heat searing enough to melt iron.

They had not, however, been enough to best an archmage from the glorious land of Param.

"How odd," the mage mused. "Yet how very much like Param's sorcerers, the manner in which he fights. Indeed, I did spy him soar through the skies unhindered!"

He examined the radiant warrior of flame at his feet. At last, the sleeping hex had quieted the boy, though the fires he'd been dousing Quldald in yet raged, even now.

"Yes, the black and gold warrior, too, once protected himself with a very similar sort of barrier. Resilient things." To pacify this single human, the archmage had been forced to use a spell with the potency to put to sleep a thousand men. "It truly is a shame, though, that he doesn't share the same exquisite suit of armor. And yet, the aegis he does wield is unyielding."

There was a belt around the boy's waist, and a Wheel of Orison rested just around the navel. A most valuable royal artifact, capable of conjuring immense amounts of magical energy, that the Earthlings used as the power source for their so-called "Asura Frames." Quldald, for his part, utilized his own form of arcane protection, preventing the flames engulfing him from so much as singing his clothing. Gradually, though, they died away.

"Now, what to do with this…'seven' something or other."

He had a few options. He could deliver the final blow now, take the boy prisoner, or perhaps prepare an execution. In truth, however, Quldald had long decided his fate. It was why he had elected to forgo his loyal gales in favor of a sleep spell. As it happened, the boy had become necessary for a plan the mage had concocted. It was truly an inspired flash of brilliance.

The archmage grinned confidently. "My parting gift to you, young human. Bear this curse, and soon you will be of great use to me."

Devicer Seven, his desolate eyes hidden behind closed eyelids, grimaced in his slumber as if witnessing a gruesome nightmare.

"You fought well, boy, I will admit. Though not as well as the black and gold," Quldald said with harsh finality. "How could you compare, after all, to the wind princess's prodigy? To the one who bends the Asura's wrath and all its invocations to his will—not just for might's sake, no, but with *grace*? With such strategic beauty, I can not help but liken it to the magnificent luster of the finest pearls!"

The sleeping Devicer said nothing.

Quldald smiled at him, almost tenderly. “Ah, but I do commend the hunger that plagues you. Your ravenous appetite for victory. Would that you and I could face each other once you had grown and matured, but that will come later. You must aid me, you see. You will help to create the ultimate stage for the ultimate battle. Between him and me.”

With a final incantation, the spell was complete. The “Mark Seventh,” or whatever those people called it, was inert, its barrier down, and the boy at his mercy.

Leo Makishima awoke with a grunt, finding himself alone. He must have lost consciousness during his battle against the archmage. His body ached, and he noted several light bruises all over. Minor damage. But still.

“I lost,” he murmured. Leo sat up surprisingly easily. He felt perfectly fine. “Why didn’t he kill me? Did something stop him? Or…”

He had failed to butcher the mage. It was a shame, but not much else. Leo wasn’t angry. Had he died, nothing of value would have really been lost. Frankly, all being alive meant was that he was forced to live and relive the archmages slipping away from him. Over and over.

“I was hardly a threat to that guy. I just have to admit it,” Leo muttered indifferently. “If I want to stand up to the archmages, I need a Replicant.”

A scarf of deep crimson was wrapped around his neck. The Asura Frame Mark VII—Agni’s onboard intelligence called it a “Holy Shroud,” and it was a vital part of his arsenal. His *frustratingly limited* arsenal, that is. Aside from the Shroud, Leo only had access to a measly four Gospel Codes.

“It’s not enough,” he growled. “I’ll never slaughter those bastards like this. I *need* to unlock more of the Mark VII’s power.”

“Leo!” a voice called. “Leo! Hey, are you all right?! Are you getting this?!”

“Shut up, Kiriko. I can hear you all the way to my bruises.”

His right palm glowed, his nanofactors activating in response to the commlink from his superior officer. The girl was military, like Leo, and her job was *technically* to oversee and direct him. There was a youthful energy in her voice, though it was tinged with the characteristic accent of Japan’s Kansai region, and a little bit of frantic worry.

“Oh, thank god! The commlinks stopped working, right? And we just totally lost the Mark VII, and my nanomachines couldn’t pick up a thing. Man, I was so worried!” she ranted at great speed and volume.

Leo ignored her with a short yet firm exhale from the nose. “I’m going to need some extra firepower,” he mumbled. “One of those elf-shaped living access points that can download Gospel Codes straight from Avalo. Without that, I’m stuck.”

“A what point that can download what from what? Can you repeat that?”

“I said be *quiet*, Kiriko,” Leo snapped at his superior. A deep pain lurked behind the boy’s eyes. “And you know I don’t take orders.”

Chapter 1: Waves Under the Moon

1

Earth was under attack from another world. In the first half of the twenty-first century, humanity was invaded by the denizens of the other side. It was just a fact of life, and Shanti Maretta Putri was one of countless people who recognized that.

Shanti was, plainly speaking, just a sixteen-year-old freshman girl in high school living in Indonesia's capital of Jakarta. Currently, she was on her way home from school and still had her uniform on—a white button-up and a long, blue skirt that fell to her ankles. Shanti was a bit of an idol fangirl, so personally, she thought it might be cute to wear her skirt just a little bit shorter. Not that her parents would ever let her, but that was fine. It wasn't a hill she'd die on.

Two classmates wearing the same uniform walked alongside her. They were all sharing some shaved ice that they'd bought at a stand together. It was topped with vanilla ice cream, white shiratama dumplings, a helping of red bean paste, and drenched with some brown sugar syrup. The three each took turns taking bites while Shanti fiddled with her phone.

"Taeyang's got a new video up!" she exclaimed.

Her friends grinned in excitement. The two of them wore jalabib (or hijabs, as they were more commonly known in other parts of the world), each hiding their hair beneath a cloth wrapped around their head. It was Islamic custom for many Muslim women, but not Shanti. She liked to dance, play sports, and she just couldn't ever sit still, so she found it a bother to mess with, much to her mother's annoyance. But she was sixteen, so her parents let her act her age for now.

She tilted her phone so her friends could see. A handsome man (who Shanti remembered would be turning nineteen this year) appeared on the LCD screen, his hair dyed from black to blond.

"How's it going, everyone?" his voice came from the speakers. He spoke in fairly fluent English. "I hope all my pretty kitties are having a lovely day! I've got a bit of bad news for you all. Y'see, I got a little hurt in the fight yesterday."

"Oh no!" Shanti's friend said. "I hope he's okay!"

"He *looks* okay. Where was it? Where'd you get hurt?" the other friend interrogated the screen.

No answer came, of course. They were simply streaming a video. Though Shanti could relate to the sentiment.

Taeyang was a male idol and member of a mega-popular K-pop group that had been sweeping across all of Asia: UNIONZ. Their fans were positively rabid, and Taeyang's fame in particular was widespread enough to reach even a group of high school girls all the way in Indonesia.

“I’m sure some of you know already, but yesterday I was sent out to the provisional capital, Incheon, on Devicer Four business. A portal-keep appeared nearby, and I had to intercept it,” Taeyang said. “You’ll see some clips of me and my partner doing just that in a bit, so don’t forget to like the video!”

The terms he was using—*Devicer Four*, *portal-keeps*, *intercept*—didn’t sound like things a Korean pop star should have been talking about.

Taeyang had enlisted in the army when he came of age, as all Korean men were required to do, and it was during his time of service that he had been chosen as the Mark IV Asura Frame’s Devicer. Nearly everyone in Korea’s military had undergone fitness testing and compatibility trials for the Mark IV, regardless of rank or status. And as fate would have it, Taeyang the lowly infantryman had scored the highest.

There was no denying the results he and Mitra were producing on the front lines. On the field, Taeyang was East Asia’s protective warden; at home, he was an idol supporting the fight from the PR and information front. Videos like the one Shanti and her friends were watching were for the purpose of raising awareness of the threat that the other side posed to everyone. Even his fancy hair was a special exception to the military’s traditional dress code, all for the sake of helping his publicity.

Shanti watched the man on her phone jabber on with his story until she couldn’t help but ask out loud, “So? Come on, where were you hurt?”

“So yeah, the fight was no biggie,” he finally concluded. “But right when I let my guard down after I de-armorized, I stumbled…and I kicked my big toe against the wall. I cracked a nail too! It was so bloody, you guys have no idea. Total gorefest.”

“Seriously?! This dork!” Shanti exclaimed. “I swear, he’s such a drama queen.”

Taeyang’s uniform—standard camouflage—was the most military thing about him. A large green robot fringed with gold accents was kneeled beside him, still taller despite being on one knee and idling patiently as he spoke. It was lean and sturdy, reassuring in its presence. But contrary to what its size might lead one to believe, it was not a robot. It was a suit. Taeyang’s “partner.” The Asura Frame Mark IV—Mitra.

“We’ve got those clips of me and Mitra putting in work coming up soon for you, so stick around,” the idol reminded them. “Don’t forget, the Anomalies could come for any of us. Even you, watching at home. So always remember, in the event of danger, prioritize safety above all else. Find shelter, hide, and wait for help!” He wagged his finger at the camera cheekily. “Until next time! Love ya!”

Footage of battle replaced the talkative pop star. Mitra was holding a big, long machine gun one-handed, mowing down monsters crawling from the ocean. They looked like giant snakes and had wings like bats. Creatures that could only vaguely be described as bipedal alligators waddled onto land with harpoons in hand, while octopus things flew through the air, wiggling

over a dozen tentacles with which they crushed the life out of fleeing humans.

Shanti sighed despondently at the sight. “It’s like this all over the northern hemisphere.”

“It doesn’t feel real, down here at the equator,” her friend said. “I mean, there’s weird stuff like supply shortages, I guess.”

The other nodded. “I hear we’re getting more refugees from up north. It’s awful in Russia and Japan, apparently.”

Eastern Russia had taken the brunt of the other side’s first assaults. Upon seeing the unilateral devastation, China and Korea took immediate action, concentrating people, supplies, and their militaries at specific urban locations and preparing to make contact with the Anomalies at a moment’s notice. Korea ended up losing Seoul, but their forces regrouped swiftly, established a new center of command, and the government was still holding on.

And then there was Japan. Japan had done none of these things. Rather than take drastic and sweeping measures, the government instead decided to reluctantly place troops at *possible* invasion points and wait for the storm—a typical Japanese response. Well, when the storm came, it came hard, and magically induced floods reduced the nation to rubble.

The government had stubbornly refused to bring all their weight to bear for fear of the economic repercussions. Shanti had heard someone on the news call the disaster in Japan “mutually agreed destruction,” attributing it to the timidity and persistent unwillingness to rock the boat that was inherent in their culture.

Shanti, though, simply felt bad for the people. The female idol group she loved was on her mind, true, but so was everyone else. The loss of life terrified her on a human level.

“Wait,” she said suddenly.

“What is it?” her friend asked.

“Shoot, I just remembered! I completely forgot I’m going to Al’iksir!”

“That was today?!”

“Yeah, gotta run!” Shanti started to trot off. “See you tomorrow!”

“Get going! You gotta tell us all about it if you meet any elves!” the other girl called after her.

Shanti hurried away, her friends shouting goodbyes at her back.

Despite it all, classes in Jakarta were still in session. A bit farther north, though, like in Vietnam or Thailand, all schools and businesses were suspended, and all available hands were preparing to meet the otherworldly threat. Of course, that didn’t mean that Indonesia was flying by the seat of its pants...right?

“I mean, my teacher did tell me this whole invitation thing is part of a nationwide initiative,” Shanti muttered uncertainly.

She was currently sitting at a table, killing time at an eatery on the wharf by sipping on some fruit juice. They wouldn't be at the harbor for a little while yet.

About a month ago, physicals had been conducted at her school. They'd been checking people's "aptitude" for something, and according to her teacher, Shanti had scored incredibly high. When she found out that she had been invited to the floating city of Al'iksir, she was over the moon.

Everyone knew about the rumored city of elves—a state-of-the-art, high-tech society built on the water right by the equator; an absolute dreamland of beautiful, smart, and eloquent elvish sages. And she, Shanti Maretta Putri, was actually getting to *go there*.

"I can't believe they're sending a whole ship out to meet me," she murmured. Shanti grinned. "Makes me feel pretty important." And then she frowned. "But I'm still nervous."

The breeze felt nice against her skin as Shanti struggled to settle on an expression. The restaurant she was loitering at had no walls and was completely open-air, only sheltered by a few dozen columns holding up a roof. So when a mysterious jade aurora appeared in Jakarta's sultry sky, she noticed it quickly.

A mystical curtain suddenly dyed the scenery outside an ominous green.

Shanti's jaw dropped. "Didn't…Taeyang talk about this?"

An aurora meant something.

They were coming.

But who was "they"? Shanti couldn't remember.

And then, for the first time, she saw it. The source of humanity's fear. The bringers of terror the likes of which no one on Earth had ever seen. Just off the coast of Jakarta Bay, floating in the sky, Shanti saw a mass of rock with a stone, temple-like edifice towering on top of it.

"An aurora means…" Shanti's lips trembled. "A portal-keep…"

Suddenly, something started to fall from the cloudless sky. Squalls weren't so strange for the tropics, of course, but the things clattering hard against the harbor's concrete weren't water droplets.

"S-Skulls?!" Shanti cried.

She flinched back. They were skulls. *Human* skulls. Thousands of them were falling to the ground all around the wharf. Shanti quickly realized that, if she had been outside, she could have been badly hurt. And then she realized that other less fortunate people already were. She had to help them.

Shanti's heart pounded restlessly while she waited for the rain to stop. When it did, she started to run.

But before she had even made it outside, she stopped. Something strange was happening to the skulls littered across the ground. First, they began to sprout spines. From there grew rib cages, shooting out from newly formed sternums, and then limbs burgeoned, assembling themselves like

amoebae undergoing mitosis. Every single skull Shanti could see was manifesting into a full human skeleton.

When the monsters began to stumble forward, Shanti noticed that they weren't unarmed. In their fleshless hands they held old and rusted swords, axes, spears, and shields of various shapes and sizes.

A girl screamed. It wasn't Shanti, though. Someone else at the same eatery was staring outside in shock. Another onlooker, a young boy, finally looked up from his phone to mutter fearfully, "Skeletons... Anomalies..."

Shanti immediately took action. "Everyone!" she called out. "We have to get away from the ocean! Safety is our first priority! Let's find shelter, hide, and wait for help!"

The skulls had stopped falling, at a glance. So Shanti rounded up the seven people who were nearby, directed them outside, and followed last, staying behind to lend her shoulder to an old woman struggling with a bad leg. As she scanned the area for somewhere safe, a harsh shriek echoed across the wharf. The skeletons had gotten to someone.

Praying that they could avoid a similar fate, Shanti and the others scurried carefully through alleys and shadows, until one man suddenly lost his nerve. Before Shanti could stop him, he bolted away from the rest of the group, desperate to escape the danger.

When he turned a corner, she heard him shout, "No!" before his voice became a guttural howl. A skeleton rounded that same corner with a wet, bloodied sword, and its eyes were on Shanti's group next.

"Ya Allah..." Shanti prayed quietly.

In response, a woman's sharp voice came from the sky. "Civilians should find shelter at once!" it said. It was unconcerned and rather high-pitched, yet distinctly thorny. "Your presence will only hinder my ability to do my job and eliminate the Anomalies! Failure to comply will be taken as forfeiture of my aid!"

The voice came from a blue suit of armor fringed with silver, and much like Taeyang's Mark IV, it conveyed a solemn kind of majesty. They were actually *very* alike in that sense.

The girl inside the metal plating delivered an impossibly nimble spin kick through the air so fast that Shanti could have sworn her leg had vanished entirely. When she saw it reappear a blink later, the skeleton's sword was gone, and its entire upper body had been smashed to splinters.

"That's an order from Devicer Five," she commanded in perfect English. "Now go!"

Shanti was mesmerized by the blue suit of armor that must have been the Asura Frame Mark V. Her eyes fell to the warrior's legs. There, a red cloth was wrapped around both of her knees all the way down to her feet.

2

A metallic sheen washed over the blue and silver Asura Frame, the sunlight reflecting off of the material in hues of argent. It was a beautiful, powerful piece of art, with defined contours along its lean form. On the back near its neck, some kind of chain hung down like a ponytail, and it moved as if alive, snakelike. The tip was tapered to a deadly point.

The girl's legs moved lightning fast, the cloth around them a red blur. Front kicks, side snap kicks, spin kicks, axe kicks—Devicer Five accompanied every display of masterful footwork with quick, disciplined kiai shouts, sounding the inevitable demise of whatever Anomaly so happened to be her target. Skeletons became fragments. Giant fae trolls went flying as if they'd been hit by a semitruck, and they didn't get back up. Golems of metal were decapitated or dismembered with single kicks as the cloth around the Asura Frame's feet cleaved through the otherworldly metal like the sharpest of swords.

Devicer Five and her partner, Varuna, danced all around Jakarta's bay area. The Anomalies were many and scattered, but a single leap with the azure Frame could cross kilometers in a second. And the Devicer could fight like this without worry for whatever creature thought it wise to sneak up behind her.

"Varuna! Handle it!"

The chain ponytail at the Frame's nape whipped like a tendril and drove its spearheaded end into a creeping goblin. It had no blind spots.

And these weren't her only weapons.

"Prayer Wheel, recite the Gospel!"

The wheel in the belt at her waist began to spin at once—a power-generating turbine present in all Frames of the Asura series. A chorus of voices, both male and female, crescendoed from the wheel. "Gate! Gate! Paragate! Gate! Gate! Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate! Gate! Paragate!"

This became the backing track to the battle as Devicer Five ordered, "MUV Sea Dragon! Artillery at the ready!"

Responding to Five's command, a beast emerged from the dark, dirty waters of Jakarta Bay—a mechanical leviathan. Extending off an elliptical hull was a long, limber neck, the end blossoming into a bloomed tulip where its head ought to be. Artillery shells rocketed from the center and arched back down towards the city. Wherever they fell, so did Anomalies. Violently. And they were powerless to stop the relentless barrage. Not even the monsters with magic to protect against such projectiles were strong enough to combat the sheer force.

The Asura Frame Mark V, Varuna, was the King of the Sea, with an army of water-based auxiliary droids at its disposal. With the additional three droids, four Sea Dragons in total cleaned up the remaining Anomalies, eventually careening over the harbor to neutralize targets more precisely and methodically.

“Oh, that kind of girl’s definitely the fussy type that’s never satisfied,” Shanti grumbled as she watched the droids work. “I can already tell.”

Shanti was still near the harbor. As far as she could tell, all the Anomalies nearby had been taken out, so no one was panicking anymore. The Sea Dragons were easily visible from where she stood, their necks poking from the murky bay, dirtied from the pollution that often accompanied developing nations. They continued to bombard the city.

“I think Taeyang called those ‘auxiliary droids’ in a video once.” According to him, Devicer Four’s Frame was specialized for fighting on the ground. “If there are chiefs of the land and sea, I wonder if there’s an air one?” Shanti wondered aloud. “I still don’t know if I like her, though. Why did she have to act so rude?”

The blue Devicer seemed to be a woman. Shanti was grateful to her, of course, but there was something about bossy girls that made her get a little judgmental. So she changed her perspective. It was surely an incredibly stressful job, being the owner of a weapon that could decide the fate of humanity. Shanti couldn’t imagine the pressure Devicers must have been under.

“Taeyang must be different,” she thought to herself. “I’m sure not everyone can act as nonchalant about it as him.”

Shanti didn’t like to bad-mouth people, and she especially didn’t like to be negative. Positivity was her goal in everything. So she decided to replace her complaints with gratitude for Jakarta’s savior.

At some point, she noticed that the aurora had vanished, and she recalled a video that had taught her this meant the portal-keep didn’t have enough magic to stay on Earth any longer. She smiled and looked towards the floating castle. Just as she’d been told, the temple-esque portal was blurring away like a mirage.

But then something took its place that made Shanti gasp. The enemy’s stronghold had vanished, only to leave in its wake a giant monster at least half of the castle’s size. Wings unfurled from its bulging, muscular back, its skin dark red. Its eyes blazed with fierce flames, and smoke plumed out of its mouth and nostrils. An inferno enveloped the being’s entire massive form. It was a pure devil of fire, utterly and truly.

“Anomaly identified. Designation...ifrit?!” Devicer Zhou Xueli growled under her breath.

Xueli was part of a special nanoparticle unit in the Chinese navy, and although it was impressive for a seventeen-year-old girl to hold the rank of lieutenant commander, Xueli took no pride in the accomplishment. She knew she was capable of so much more than her position allowed, which was why she found it quite cathartic to be a Devicer. The Asura Frame let her utilize her martial arts prowess and wits as she pleased. She liked that, despite the...impediments still limiting her true capabilities.

“A fire devil,” she hissed. “Not quite archmage level, but close enough in terms of spellcraft.”

Drained of magic, the portal-keep had disappeared. Clearly, however, they hadn’t been so dry as to neglect leaving their parting gift with enough mana to cause widespread destruction. *How polite of them*, Xueli thought.

“This wouldn’t be a *problem* if I had some *help*.” Xueli groaned in frustration as she leapt into the air. “I am *really* not in the mood for this!”

The Mark V lifted her high up, all the way to a solid ten stories, where she bid the Frame to stop.

“Varuna! Doomsday Book chapter two! Hydro Torrent!”

The Prayer Wheel immediately began to whir fiercely. A window appeared on the Head Mounted Display in Xueli’s visor, and a poem scrolled across the screen.

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Pray, oh Suiten, speak the truest words.
Pound its drum, blow its conch, and shed its rain.
Sing for us, oh Suiten, the transient voices, a symphony of
truth.
```

The strange words spelled destruction. In response to Xueli’s gaze, on a large city street, water suddenly erupted from the asphalt, like a spontaneous and skyward-bound waterfall. The gravity-defying pillar shot towards the heavens and surged forward, consuming and assimilating the Mark V on its approach towards the ifrit as the Anomaly neared Jakarta’s coast. Striking swiftly and decisively before the enemy could act was Xueli’s specialty. Her combat instincts were second to none.

Together with the Mark V, the pillar of water struck the enormous devil from below with an aquatic uppercut, using the force of the upward-cascading water to send the ifrit flying. The flames and water hissed upon impact as the former were extinguished and the latter vaporized into steam. Most importantly, however, Xueli had succeeded in pushing the Anomaly away from the city and towards the bay.

“Now that collateral damage is out of the picture…” she murmured. “Lifters online!”

The objects once used to lift elvish cities now powered the flight of the Asura Frames. The antigravity lifters gave Varuna free reign of the sky. At that moment, though, a massive orb of fire shot towards her.

“The Fireball spell! And a big one!”

Xueli narrowly dodged the attack, feeling its sweltering heat. She had seen this sort of magic numerous times, but never on this scale before. It was over ten meters wide. The source of the spell glared at Varuna with a scowl on its face. At least the fact that the fire devil was angered meant that Xueli had done a good bit of damage to it.

But the battle wasn’t over yet.

“Sea Dragons! Continue artillery!”

At their leader's command, the four droids in the bay resumed bombardment. They shelled their fiery target with unwavering accuracy, and the devil scowled down at the pests. And then it grinned sadistically, almost like a human. In the blink of an eye, the winged humanoid transformed its very body into an enormous fireball. The artillery strikes might as well have been pea shooters against it.

"Nullifying physical attacks by hiding its corporeal form." Xueli clicked her tongue. "This is why I hate fighting spellcasters!"

The giant fireball began to shed cinders, countless of them, onto Xueli and Varuna's auxiliary droids below. The tiny sparks scorched holes in the machines, puncturing them until they finally combusted entirely.

All four droids were destroyed.

"Gunpowder magic." Xueli sighed. "Fine. Shroud, Excalibur Mode! I need you!"

The red cloth around the Mark V's legs—a little mismatched adorning a metal contraption—shimmered with a pale golden light. No sooner had she prepared her attack than the fireball pitched towards the Frame, hungry to swallow it up in its flaming maw.

Xueli spun in place, swinging her leg swaddled in glowing cloth into the orb of churning plasma and tearing the incorporeal flames asunder. From that wound, the ball diffused away, and the ifrit regained its anthropomorphic form. It fixed its rageful gaze on the blue Asura, before directing its glower to the Frame's legs specifically.

"Clever one, aren't you? That's right. This is the Holy Shroud, an ancient and vaunted artifact of the elvish royal families. And it just so happens to do the job against pesky monsters like you who refuse to keep a physical form," Xueli monologued coolly. "I do wish you'd made this easy and gone down with my droids and Doomsday Book, but it is what it is. If cutting you to ribbons myself is what it takes to win, so be it. By the time I'm done, there won't be enough left of you to light so much as a single match!"

Xueli proceeded to keep her promise, and the ifrit was summarily eviscerated. Only she and Varuna remained in the sky, the victors.

She looked up at the cloudless, blue expanse and sighed. "Avalo is up there. Thirty-six thousand kilometers above the equator. In geostationary orbit," she murmured.

It was a military satellite meant for the purpose of providing aid and support to the Asura Frames and other nano-augmented individuals like her. More than any outpost on Earth, that satellite was vital to the Asura series. A veritable holy ground for them.

But it wasn't simply floating around up there. It was manned, though the details were highly classified. Much like the International Space Station, the craft supposedly had living space to accommodate two very important personnel. The first was Devicer Nine, warrior of Virochana—the Mark IX

Asura Frame. The other was his Replicant assistant, known commonly as the “Solar Prince.” Not even Xueli had met them.

“And yet, that elf above the clouds is the one who bestowed the Holy Shroud to me.”

It was said that he was always watching, observing from orbit. And should the Replicant receive particularly striking data from Devicers on Earth, he would bequeath to them the Holy Shroud or potentially transmit Gospel Codes.

But it was an incomplete arrangement. Without physical contact, it was shaky at best to rely on such support.

“Varuna and I only have four Gospel Codes,” Xueli murmured. “It’s not enough. As we are, these magic-type anomalies are too much trouble.” She knew the solution, of course. “I need her.”

3

An hour after the attack, Shanti found herself aboard a fairly sizable ferry as it coasted across the water. She couldn’t believe her invitation hadn’t been suspended on account of the emergency, and yet there she was.

“This ‘matter’ of theirs must be pretty important,” Shanti said, thinking aloud as she recalled the phone call. A rather well-spoken man with a young voice had urged her to proceed with the visit. He sounded polite and, honestly, kind of handsome. “I wonder if that guy on the phone was an elf.”

The shock of the battle still hadn’t quite worn off. In truth, Shanti just wanted to see her family, but her curiosity for the mysterious elvish people and their “urgent matter” won in the end. Whatever it was, it had to be worth the detour.

Shanti was the only person on the boat, and although the trip was painfully mundane, it had been dispatched for *her* specifically. Quite the royal treatment, she felt, but horribly lonely just the same.

“I wish there was *someone* here to talk to,” she murmured.

At that moment, the air next to her hummed. Something landed on the deck nearby, completely soundless aside from the ever so faint whir of a contraption. A two-meter-tall suit of glistening blue metal stood there.

“The Asura Frame?!” Shanti yelped.

She blinked in disbelief, and in that split second, the armor had dissolved into particles of light. In its place was a slender and attractive young woman, her lustrous black hair tied in two loose tails resting on either shoulder. She seemed a bit on the taller end, and her stark expression accentuated the enchanting ennui of her demeanor.

Shanti couldn’t take her eyes away. The woman looked so delicate. So fragile.

The girl returned the stare pointedly. “Can I help you?” she asked, more rhetorically than kindly. “If you have something to say to me, then spit it out.”

Shanti recognized her voice at once. There was no mistaking it. This supermodel of a girl was Devicer Five.

“I-I’m sorry, I was just—” Shanti was starting to remember why she hadn’t liked this girl at first. “You, um, changed so suddenly. It surprised me.”

The girl looked Han Chinese, and she was wearing what almost appeared to be a workout fit. Her pink, formfitting hoodie, black thigh highs, and short shorts were all water-resilient and seemingly chosen for their practicality above all else.

Her outfit emphasized her figure well. She really was as trim as a model and positively brimming with femininity.

The intimidating girl frowned. “I ‘surprised’ you?” she parroted. “Don’t tell me you’re on a ship bound for a floating city and you don’t even know what Asura Frames or nanomachines are.”

“I mean, I just got my invitation today,” Shanti replied meekly.

The girl scanned her up and down. “Hm.”

She certainly made no effort to hide her forwardness, and it made Shanti a little uncomfortable. “I don’t know *why* or anything,” she said, desperate to escape the awkwardness. “I’m just nervous.”

“That’s stupid,” the girl stated haughtily. “Obviously it’s because you have a high aptitude for nanomachines. No one in the world is more in demand than people like you. Tell me your name.” She did. “Shanti? Well, Shanti, I’m Xueli, family name Zhou, and once you receive your nano-augmentations, I implore you to join my team. I can promise you’ll be treated with the utmost respect and courtesy.”

“W-Wait, what?!” Shanti stammered. Her brain hadn’t quite processed everything yet. “Th-This is way too sudden!”

“I value efficiency. We’re in too much of a crisis to waste precious seconds with formalities and bureaucracy.”

“I don’t even remember half of what you said! Nano-aug *whats*?!”

“The migrant sages have developed next-generation technology that allows one to undergo nanomachine transplantation, and as your fitness adapts and grows, you become able to do things that were previously impossible,” the beautiful Devicer ranted as Shanti stared blankly. “The search continues in my home country, but there simply aren’t enough individuals with the appropriate compatibility. Not even I, Zhou Xueli, warrior and patriot, have managed to fully staff a support team. Thus I was forced to extend my hunt abroad.”

“How do you even know I have any kind of fitness, or compatibility, or whatever it is?!” Shanti shouted. This Xueli girl was evidently as open-minded as a brick wall. “Taeyang said the Mark V was in China, so that’s where you’re from, isn’t it? I’m *not* leaving Indonesia!”

“This is getting us nowhere.” Xueli sighed. “Nationality and borders will be the death of all of us. Eventually we’re going to have to throw petty tribalism away and fight together if we ever want to stand a chance against the other side, and I’ll drag the world kicking and screaming to cooperation if I have to. I’m doing you a favor by giving you the chance to help me *without* the temper tantrum. Don’t forget it.”

Odd encounters aside, the ferry reached its destination safely.

The city of Al’iksir floated in the Java Sea just outside of Jakarta Bay, a monumental construction upon which a ten-kilometer circle, referred to as the central block, had been built in the middle. In the center stood Central

Tower, a three-hundred-meter-tall edifice that functioned as the heart of the city's entire infrastructure. The outer block circled around the edges and formed the exterior circumference of the settlement. From above, it had the appearance of a water lily, and these artificial communities dotted oceans all over the world, including Japan.

Shanti saw many humans, but she paid them little attention, because her eyes were immediately glued to the elves. She'd never seen the otherworldly race in person before, though she knew about their ears, striking beauty, and extraordinarily long life spans. The migrants who had come to Earth were apparently all brilliant minds among their people.

And Shanti didn't just get to see them. She *talked* to them. The elvish man who greeted her was the perfect gentleman, and he guided her through the city with geniality becoming of one. She saw droid testing sites, farmerless farms, state-of-the-art medical facilities, and their giant source of power that they called a Prayer Wheel.

After the tour, the elf took Shanti to a pristine room in Central Tower, where he carefully went into detail about nanomachines and compatibility. "That is to say, Shanti," he continued, "you have a very precious gift. Our request to you is that you undergo nano-augmentation and aid us in our research."

It was all just as predicted. Shanti froze up and struggled to find her answer. Meanwhile, the foreteller herself, Zhou Xueli, leaned against a wall nearby with a cheeky, know-it-all grin on her face. It irritated Shanti, and she didn't want that smug face in the corner of her eye when she gave her reply, regardless of what it might be.

"Can I...have some time to think about it?" she asked finally.

"Of course," the elf replied. "It's gotten dark, though. We can prepare a room for you to spend the night in."

And so it was decided. Shanti had just gotten off the phone with her mother a few hours ago, letting her know she was safe, and now she was going to have to make another call to ask permission to stay overnight in the middle of the ocean.

She dialed the number and sighed, hard and heavy. She tried explaining as much as she could about nanomachines and fitness and all that, but to her mother it was all technical mumbo jumbo, so Shanti only found herself wondering why she'd even bothered in the first place.

Overall, the phone call went about as well as it could have. When it was over, Shanti mumbled helplessly to herself, "What am I supposed to do?"

"Easy. You take the augmentations and join me. It could be the best decision you make for your otherwise bland and ordinary life."

"You be quiet!" Shanti snapped. Her patience with the Devicer girl was wearing thin. "You're in the army like Taeyang, right? Don't you have a base or squad or whatever to report back to?!"

"Oh, I'll be fine. I planned on staying the night," Xueli replied.

Shanti groaned. "Of course you did."

“My team’s area of operation primarily covers the Chinese coast, extending only as far as the East and South China Seas. Why would I be all the way down in Jakarta if not on explicit business?”

“To…rescue us?” Shanti asked.

“A good guess, but if that were the case, I would have arrived later into the invasion. It was just luck that I happened to be visiting Al’iksir at the same time.”

In other words, she had every reasonable right to be there. Shanti was dumbfounded. How could a girl look so soft on the outside yet have a heart of cold steel on the inside?

“Speaking of business, you should join me on it,” Xueli offered all of a sudden.

“What? Why?!”

“Don’t you want to learn more about nanomachines and the elves who created them? I think you would benefit from having more information to help you make your decision.”

Shanti wasn’t good at arguing. It wasn’t in her nature. So as much as she hated to admit it, Xueli had a very good point.

The Devicer walked through Central Tower’s halls quickly and with confidence, stepping into an elevator that shot up the length of the building. They rode it to the fifty-second floor.

“It looks like a hotel,” Shanti commented.

“This is the living quarters. It’s where the elves reside,” Xueli explained.

Doors lined the corridor, spread apart at generous intervals that spoke to the ample space granted to each resident. The girls continued along it until they came to an open lounge hall. Elegant elvish men and women were standing around chatting, conversing on the sofas, poring over documents, or simply passing the time in their own graceful ways.

Xueli ignored all of them, pacing straight for the center of the room where a small elf girl sat. All the migrants from the other side looked young, but this girl especially looked to be fifteen or sixteen by human standards, and her face seemed somehow more youthful than the others. Her ears were long, and her skin was the same dark shade as Shanti’s but a twinge redder.

Shanti had passed by a multitude of elves in the last few hours, and they had been anything but homogenous. Just like humans, they were a diverse people and had skin tones of all hues.

The bronze-skinned girl had a cherubic face, and she sat on a rug with her legs strewn to the side. In her hands, she plucked a long string instrument reminiscent of a koto. She sang to the tune of the melody, “Gate Gate Paragate… Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha… Gate Gate Paragate… Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha…”

“It’s beautiful,” Shanti murmured. The song brought a smile to her face. “She’s speaking the elves’ language, right? I wonder what it means.” She spoke quietly, for fear of disturbing the girl’s performance.

Although she hadn’t been expecting an answer, Xueli obliged. “It means ‘O Traveler. Heed me, O Traveler, Wanderer of the realm and distances vast. Rejoice, O Siddha. The awakening has begun.’”

“You understand her?” Shanti asked.

“A little. I’m still studying. But it’s not the *elves’* language, per se. It’s the common tongue in most of Param,” Xueli replied. “It’s extremely similar to Sanskrit on Earth, but they aren’t one-to-one. I imagine that long ago in the ancient past, our world and the alien one were once connected by some means. And so our cultures mingled. At least, that’s one theory the evidence points to.”

“Wow…”

Evidently, the airs Xueli put on weren’t just for show. She was a genuinely intelligent person. Granted, her skill in martial arts had already been made abundantly clear, but even now, as they communicated in English, Xueli commanded the language even better than Shanti herself.

Just as Shanti was beginning to find new respect for her, Xueli marched pompously to the bronze-skinned girl, swaggering with her same old belligerence.

“This makes three, Klan,” she said, with a tone so pointed it would put a dagger to shame. The elf girl jolted in shock but said nothing. Xueli, however, took Klan’s obviously apprehensive silence as clearance to continue. “I believe the saying is ‘third time’s the charm,’ so I hope you’re ready to tell me what I want to hear. You’re a Replicant of the Earth Bloodline, aren’t you? A clone of their last ruler, the Queen of Stars. It’s your duty.”

No reply came.

“All I’m asking is for you to assist the Asura Frames and Devicers like you’re supposed to. Namely me and Varuna,” Xueli continued. “If you really are the princess everyone else makes you out to be, then you’ll know the definition of noblesse oblige.”

Klan took the ear-lashing in silence, shrinking smaller with every word. She didn’t even turn around to meet the girl’s cold yet magnetic gaze. Shanti wasn’t sure if she was just quiet or timid or what was even going on, but she didn’t much care at that point.

“Stop that!” she interjected. “Can’t you see you’re scaring her?”

“Oh, forgive me. It’s only all of Asia and thereby the entire world at stake,” Xueli snapped back. “I’ll be sure to remember my manners while society crumbles around us.”

“There’s absolutely no reason you have to be rude!”

Eventually, some of the surrounding sages came to stop the argument and carefully soothe the fuming Devicer. The elf girl named Klan took refuge behind Shanti as they did.

When everything was said and done, it had grown late into the night, and Xueli (still very much in a bad mood) reluctantly decided it was time to retreat to her room. Before Shanti could leave, though, Klan reached out and grabbed Shanti's right hand with both of her own.

Shanti waited for her to say something, before asking, "Are you, um…saying goodbye?"

The elf girl stayed quiet. She was smaller than even Shanti, who was already pretty puny, but while Shanti was fairly lean from all the dancing she liked to do, Klan had a lot more curvature to her figure. She looked up at Shanti with an unreadable expression.

"I've gotta go too, so…" Shanti trailed off awkwardly. "See you tomorrow?"

Klan's lips curved into a vague smile. Her deep eyes seemed to say "yes." The girl then promptly trotted away in total silence. She was so quiet, everything she did made her look like a small, shy animal.

The exhaustion crashed into Shanti all at once. What a day it had been. Replicants, nanomachine this, nanomachine that…

And then she saw something in the corner of her eye.

"Is my hand…glowing?"

It was. The palm of her right hand, the very hand Klan had been holding, was faintly sparkling.

"WHAT THE HECK?!"

The room was already empty, so Shanti wandered dumbfoundedly into the adjoining corridor to find someone who could tell her what the heck was going on this time.

4

Night fell over Jakarta, and just as tomorrow was about to become today, something stirred in the city streets. They began as mere flickering will-o'-wisps, emerging from nothing and rising up into the sky. There, the sparks of fire grew rapidly, and soon they reached a size large enough to swallow a house whole.

The giant fireballs started to drift through the air above the city, violent flares erupting from the spheres at random. Buildings caught in its range went up in flames. Wooden constructions turned to ash in seconds, while even concrete only took a few minutes to combust. The conflagration was of an unreal intensity.

Four balls of fire occupied Jakarta's sky, but within minutes, they had changed. And their forms became strikingly human.

"*Four* ifrits in Jakarta? At the *same time*?!" Xueli scowled. "There were more?"

“It would seem so,” a refined male sage said. “The Chosen Dharva who masters the portal from this afternoon appears to have left not one devil behind, but five.”

The two stared out the glass that encircled the entirety of the top floor of Al’iksir’s Central Tower. Ten minutes ago, Xueli had been relaxing in her room when the enemy alert message came, and she rushed to the observation desk as fast as she could. Unfortunately, though, not to enjoy the view.

“Then the first one was just bait, while the other four were ticking time bombs, waiting for us to let our guard down,” she surmised, trying in vain to hide her frustration. “The archmages are calculating. They plot out every damned move just to cause as much destruction as possible. It’s infuriating.”

Xueli wished she had some of that cleverness on her side. If only she had a team of staff who were more useful than a bag of bricks.

“Can I expect Klan’s assistance?” she asked the sage.

“I promise I will do what I can,” he replied. “But your compatibility with the Princess of Stars is less than desirable. I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Oh, for the love of... This is a war, not a date!” She had barely scraped by against *one* of those creatures, and now there were four. Meanwhile, her key to victory was sulking because she was *shy*. Xueli was beside herself. “Fine. Do what you can,” she said. “Armorize.”

A cloud of nanofactors flowed out of her right hand. A second later, blue nano-armor covered her body, and together with the Asura Frame Mark V, she took off through an emergency exit in the deck’s roof.

The full moon was out, and the waves of the Java Sea shimmered in its light.

“Wait! Klan! Where are you taking me?!”

The Replicant girl pulled Shanti along in silence. Quiet though she was, the stern expression on Klan’s face as they rushed through the halls spoke volumes. She’d shown up at Shanti’s room, grabbed her right hand, and dragged her all the way to the elevator without a single explanation. And now they were hurrying along a corridor on the twentieth floor.

Central Tower was strangely noisy that night. Shanti managed to piece together from tower-wide announcements and the harried voices of passing elves and humans that Anomalies had appeared in Jakarta again. She prayed for the safety of her friends and family.

Klan put her hand to a security device of some kind, opening a door. Inside was a wide open room that resembled a museum. Display cases filled with a diverse collection of items, from swords to instruments to thick books and even jewelry, filled the space.

Shanti whipped her head around at all the exhibits, trying to figure out why the two of them were there. “What is this place?” she asked.

“The Treasury,” Klan answered, almost inaudibly. Shanti couldn’t believe her ears for a moment. She’d actually talked. Her voice was quiet, wispy, but pleasant like an instrument and most certainly cute. “You have to help Varuna and the mean lady.”

“You mean Miss Xueli and the Mark V?” Shanti asked. “Well, I’m, uh…not entirely sure how I’m supposed to do that?”

Klan replied by raising her arm and pointing to something at the back of the room.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Soma,” Klan said. “The eighth Asura.”

She pointed to a suit of armor with a silver sheen. Its anatomy was slightly curvy and somewhat feminine, and even the face of its helmet had a peculiar softness to it. Accented with dashes of black, the suit gleamed like a piece of antique metalwork.

“Wait, wh-what’s going on?!” Shanti shouted suddenly. “What is this?! Cloth?! From where?!”

Her right hand started to glow again. Those particles of light were back, this time forming together to create something. A long strip of purple fabric that resembled a scarf fell into her open palm. The moment it did, Shanti remembered Klan’s song—“O Traveler. Heed me, O Traveler, Wanderer of the realm and distances vast. Rejoice, O Siddha. The awakening has begun.”

“A-Are you,” Shanti stammered, “telling me to put on the Asura Frame?”

“Yes.”

“Astaghfirullah, you can’t be serious!”

Suddenly, they weren’t alone anymore. Two more girls entered the treasury, and Shanti heard one of them sigh.

“Thirteen hours on a plane. I’m exhausted.”

“I rather enjoyed the experience. Though I do wish they’d obliged and let me try my hand at steering it.”

“Somehow I get the feeling you’d steal the pilot’s job, Ein.” The larger elf girl had black hair, and the other looked to still be in middle school. “Just please make sure you practice first before putting any of us on it with you. I refuse to have the name ‘Aliya’ be associated with ‘death by plane crash’!”

“Oh, I’m sure Yu would be there to help you.”

“This is the last kind of talk we need to be having first thing on our important trip. The whole reason we suffered through all those layovers was to start experiments for getting the Mark VIII online, so I say we focus on—Oh. Someone already beat us here.”

“Oh?” The black-haired elf girl with the commanding aura smiled wide. Her eyes fell to the girl at Shanti’s side. “I had heard you were here, but I never expected we would meet so soon. You must be the Queen of Stars, clone of the Earth Bloodline. I recognize your face.”

“Are you the Princess of Wind?” Klan asked.

“I am. I’m called Ein in this life.” The girl spoke and carried herself with pleasant spiritedness. “What do they call you?”

Shanti immediately liked her.

Xueli let out a long and shrill kiai shout as she loosed a flurry of kick attacks in midair. Jakarta stretched out far below the Mark V as it floated roughly one hundred meters above with the flight-inducing abilities of the antigravity lifters.

Varuna bombarded the ifrit's chest with what must have been dozens upon dozens of front kicks, each Shroud-swaddled leg landing with a satisfying thud. The intensity was like a firework, and the ferocity like a deluge of raindrops chiseling the earth. Had she displayed such an attack on the ground, her legs would have been moving too fast to leave shadows—the famous shadowless kick given genuine form. And the enemy was already injured by a blow from the same Doomsday Book torrent that she had also used that afternoon.

But just when Xueli had the Anomaly on the ropes and was about to finally finish off one of the four devils, a second appeared, and it spat out a surge of fire.

"Varuna! Keep that shell online!" she ordered.

While the Devicer continued to kick and thrash as the temperature inside the suit skyrocketed, the third ifrit emerged and cast the Major Explosion spell. The air boomed, and the force of the devastating blast sent the Mark V flying. The anti-magic shell had failed to nullify the damage in time. Xueli and the Asura of the sea fell, their target saved from peril.

They landed hard against the roof of a tall building, though it was hardly enough to damage the Frame. Xueli stood right back up and glared angrily up at the sky. She'd been one tantalizing second away from finishing the job.

The four ifrits flew down to her, stopping a distance away. They were avoiding her close-ranged attacks now, and they began to chant a spell together.

Xueli growled. "Shroud! Protect us!"

She tore a piece of the cloth around her legs and threw it upwards. The Holy Shroud unraveled at once, spreading into thousands of long, thin threads that drifted around her. Each and every one was an anti-magic shield, but would it be enough against the combined spellcraft of four ifrits?

The sweat on Xueli's back was cold. She wasn't optimistic. There had to be another way.

"Requesting commlink connection."

All of a sudden, a message window appeared in her visor. Someone augmented was trying to access her nanofactors.

"Now is not the best time," Xueli hissed. She glanced at the "confirm" button sourly to input her command. "Who is it?!"

"*A friend*," someone replied. The voice was androgynous. Not quite male, not quite female. "*I want to help you and the Mark V. All you have to do is use the opening.*"

“Excuse me?!”

“Things weren’t looking good when I got here, so I already have a plan. Ein, the Gospel Code.”

“*Understood*,” said a new voice. This one was undoubtedly female. “*The beast of wind is hungry.*”

This voice must have been with this new, genderless teammate, otherwise she couldn’t have connected to Xueli. She began to recite a somber poem, her face invisible but her voice emphatic and free.

—The sinners of the trailokya know not their sin.

—Such as the fools of the four wombs know not their folly.

—In darkness we are born, to darkness we return, and to darkness we are born anew.

Xueli recognized the menacing and powerful words. “You’re using the Doomsday Book. You’re a Devicer!”

“*That is what they call me*,” said the androgynous voice. They certainly had a flair for the dramatic. “*In the name of Rudra, the King of the Storm—attack!*”

Rudra. That was the Mark III, and that made this person Japan’s Devicer Three. But he was supposed to be dead. The Chinese military had been informed that he’d been killed in action.

Xueli put the pieces together. “You’re the successor. The new Devicer Three,” she deduced. “Well, you certainly put your predecessor to shame!”

The last Three from Japan’s Defense Force had failed to so much as earn the Holy Shroud. Xueli had always resented that man for his incompetence, but she resented the Japanese government for choosing him even more.

“I’ll have to take your word for it.”

The wind started to pick up, cycloning into a tempestuous hell, whirling into a twister. As the gales buffeted the hovering fire devils, the flames engulfing their bodies were whipped away. And amidst the storm, white and airy enough to be mistaken for the typhoon itself, there was a four-legged beast in the shape of a panther.

It pounced at the first ifrit and promptly tore out its throat. The second ifrit was carried up into the heavens by the magical winds, where it exploded into cinders, wiped from existence.

“Aha! I see now!” said Xueli. “This is my opening!”

Despite the destruction raging around her, the most the Mark V felt was a comfortable breeze. The King of the Storm had favored her with protection.

Xueli took flight with renewed vigor and delivered a swift spin kick to the third ifrit as it struggled against the winds. Equipped with the shining blade of Excalibur swathed around her legs, the fire devil was thus decapitated.

Someone else beat her to the fourth. A high-speed bullet flying beyond Mach 5. Fast approaching the final ifrit was an Asura of black and gold.

“This is it.”

Devicer Three collided with the Anomaly, emitting ripples of supersonic shock waves like an iron missile. The ifrit didn’t stand a chance.

“Another Replicant,” Xueli murmured. “And she’s with Three’s successor!”

She gazed at the stream of footage being played in her visor. The King of the Storm, Rudra, was there in the sky. Xueli’s Holy Shroud was red and apparently Klan’s was purple, but this one was yellow.

The Devicer had called the girl “Ein.” She was the third Replicant.

Beneath her azure mask, Devicer Zhou Xueli’s face broke into a fiery grin, burning with newfound spirit. “It looks like my luck’s finally turning around.”

Chapter 2: Of the Wind

1

It was the morning after the attack of the fire devils, and Yu Ichinose's day was greeted passionately by Jakarta's tropical weather.

"Jeez, it's only May and it's boiling out here."

The sun mercilessly beat down on him from the moment Yu stepped out of Al'iksir's Central Tower, and it was still only nine in the morning. The transition from air conditioning to sweltering heat was almost dizzying. Thankfully, Yu had managed to borrow a T-shirt and shorts to change into, because he might have been roasted alive had he kept on the clothes he'd worn from Nayuta.

"I'll take it over all those connecting flights we had to take to get here," said Aliya Todo. She wore a thin dress, perfect for the summery weather. "Shanghai, Da Nang, *and* Singapore. They at least seemed like they were still hanging in there. It was nice to finally see some real cities for a change."

"Shanghai was a little different from what I expected, though," Yu remarked. "The airport was basically empty, and I barely saw any cars or people when I looked out the window from the plane."

"That's because over half the population was relocated a few months ago," Aliya explained.

"Relocated?! How do you relocate tens of millions of people?"

"They wanted to repurpose and fortify the city into a sort of bastide for meeting the Anomaly invasion. Drones patrol the area, shelters were built underground, and I think they moved residents to safer public housing districts."

"That sounds…complicated."

"Well, it paid off," Aliya said. "While Russia was getting hit hard, they prepared for the worst, and it's thanks to that foresight that they managed to just barely hold out."

"Man," Yu said with a sigh. The parallels to be made were evident. But there was no point wondering what might have been had a certain *other* country been as wise and sensed the coming danger. So instead, he glanced at his partner. "What was the weather like in your country, Ein?"

"Colder and drier than Japan," she replied. "The climate of Klan's kingdom, however, was very much like this. Always basking in midsummer year-round."

Aliya nodded at the elvish princess's words. "It sounds like your world was as diverse as ours."

Ein sported a long, floral cardigan over a plain white T-shirt that morning. She also wore a pair of revealing denim shorts that she had apparently borrowed from Natsuki, and Yu found the sight of her bare legs more than a little distracting. Together with the straw hat shading her eyes,

she looked the very picture of summer fashion—a very purposeful aesthetic. The girl had gone to great lengths to style her wardrobe specifically for this trip from the moment she'd heard about their destination's climate.

"Anyway, the experiments finally begin today," Aliya said. "I'm not sure how much we'll be able to do for the Mark VIII, seeing as it went on the fritz the moment they finished developing it, but maybe something will happen like with Natsuki's Mark VI."

They had come to Indonesia to bolster their forces by awakening the dormant Asura, and to test a theory. The common denominator in both the Mark III's and the Mark VI's awakenings was Aliya, so what if her very own nanofactors had been the key? Perhaps the half-elf girl could learn to harness such a power, if it really did slumber within her.

"Yu," Ein beckoned.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"If things go as planned, you and I may be apart for some time," she said. "I think it only proper that we spend our remaining time as soon-to-be forlorn lovers should."

"What am I even supposed to say to that?!" Yu blustered.

"Oh my, shall I leave you two alone?" Aliya interjected, grinning mischievously. "Not that I will, even if you ask. This is too good not to watch."

"Daughter of Chloe," Ein said pointedly, "if this were my land, your frivolous taunting would very well be taken for treason, and I'd be powerless to help you."

"Come on, can you blame me?" the half-elf girl whined. "I can't help but want to see how Yu'll worm his way out of this one. What if this is finally where he breaks?"

The three were so caught up in their banter that none of them noticed the appearance of a fourth.

"There you are."

Yu looked towards the familiar voice. A slender, black-haired girl of about the same age as Natsuki was standing there. Based on the workout outfit she was wearing, she seemed to have just come back from a morning jog. There was no mistaking it—she was the Chinese navy's Devicer Five.

"Zhou Xueli is my name," she said. "Now, where are they?"

"'They'?" Yu repeated in confusion.

"Rudra's Devicer. You're their staff, I assume?" She looked at Ein. "I know you, though. You're the third Replicant. Ein, was it?"

"I am she, good ruler of the abyss," she replied in her usual royal cadence. "You fought well last night. As valiantly as the King of the Storm himself."

"Of course I did. I don't make mistakes in combat," the girl stated completely unabashedly. Yu and Aliya exchanged glances. It looked like Nadal had a new contender for eccentricity. "A correction, though. Three won the battle, not I. I'd hardly consider our displays comparable."

Yu was stunned for a moment. After the admittedly few words they'd shared yesterday, he'd pegged her for the proud, conceited type. And yet she'd fully admitted to someone being her better. Maybe she wasn't so stuck up after all.

"Granted, that can all be explained by *your* presence, Ein. Had our positions been reversed, I imagine I'd have performed similarly, if not better," Xueli ranted. "Three is awfully lucky for finding you before I could."

Yu deliberately chose to bite his tongue. He took it all back. This girl was downright hostile.

"Our meeting was one ordained by fate," Ein replied indifferently in his stead. "Though even if it weren't, luck is a valuable asset on the battlefield, you know. Few are as formidable as a warrior with fortune's favor."

Xueli smiled. "I like you," she said. "I've never met an elf who I can see eye to eye with. The sages are all spineless sycophants, honestly. I can't go five seconds speaking to one without wanting to pull my own hair out."

"The Wind Bloodline is a martial clan. I consider myself a warrior before a scholar."

"Then I like you even more! You're the perfect Replicant to be my assistant," Xueli said loftily. "You and Three, surrender to me at once!"

“S-Surrender?” Yu shot back, finally defying the girl’s intimidating command of the conversation. “What the heck’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It means admitting I am superior and joining my ranks,” she replied. “I will grant that Three made quite the impression, but that fake, overly dramatic attitude would be burned to ash in the face of *my* fiery passion.”

“Okay,” Yu said simply.

“The leader of the *Power Rangers* is usually red, I’ll have you know. I’d consider Three to be, hmmm…black or blue, maybe. But certainly not the leader.”

And now she was rambling about *Super Sentai*. She would have gotten along with Ijuin if she was into tokusatsu, but Yu was far too stupefied to give it much thought. Xueli was indeed passionate like fire, and Yu couldn’t hope to match that kind of personality.

She squinted suspiciously and scanned him up and down. “Who are you again?”

“Yu Ichinose,” he replied slowly. “I’m…Devicer Three’s manager, I guess.”

“Well, you tell them to contact me, because there’s an adjutant position on my team waiting just for them. I’d like to discuss terms.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

Despite her talents, talking to this Zhou Xueli girl was quite the ordeal. Yu felt like he needed his armor just to hold a conversation with her, and it was everything he could do to smile and nod his way through this one. Aliya and Ein, on the other hand, couldn’t contain their grins. It must have been quite entertaining to watch the girl speak to Three as if they weren’t even there, and Yu’s suffering was apparently the perfect punch line.

“Anyway, Ein,” Xueli said. “You convene with your partner and consider my offer. The next time we meet, I hope you’ll be resolved and ready to join me. Oh, and don’t make me ask again. I hate tedium, and I’ve learned that the third time is, in fact, *not* the charm.”

And with that, she was gone.

The entire engagement had been conducted in English. Before heading abroad, Yu had installed an English translation tool onto his nanomachines, and without it, he would have been utterly lost.

“It feels, uh, pretty weird having all my thoughts in English,” he muttered. “Well, weird in the sense that it *doesn’t* feel weird. The elves can make anything, huh?”

“Relying on it too much can make your language cognition wonky, so leave it off when you’re not using it,” Aliya explained. She actually had no use for it, seeing as her vast, half-elf mind had already learned and grasped the English language. Ein had fared just the same.

“Now, I wasn’t finished,” the otherworldly queen said, returning to Japanese. “Let us bid farewell as true loves must.”

“Oh, yeesh, look at the time!” Yu sputtered quickly. “Bye, Ein!”

“Yu!” She spread her arms out wide. “I await the coveted ‘hug’ with bated breath! Embrace me as you did so passionately during our most recent game! When we scored the decisive goal! I know you remember!”

Ein stood there, arms outstretched and ready, while Aliya’s eyes were glued to the spectacle. Even without any onlookers, Yu would have felt horribly awkward, so he called out the nanofactors from his right hand and armorized, equipping the black and gold armor to effectively avoid the situation altogether.

“I’m heading back. Good luck with the Mark VIII,” he said. But the voice was not the temperamental Yu’s. The words, in all their androgynous, fake, and overly dramatic glory, came from Devicer Three.

Ein pouted her cheeks and settled for an excessively affected wave for her goodbye. The antigravity lifters came online, and Yu took off, setting a course for Japan at supersonic speeds.

He had one more job to take care of.

2

“I am displeased,” grumbled Nadal Rafthul T’ashsakharington, speaker of Nayuta and a migrant sage. Among all of his equally brilliant colleagues, he was considered particularly ingenious in matters of gambits and guiles. And currently, he was pouting. “Why, oh why would anyone leave the sanctity of our settlement to go roll around in the filth and corruption of *Japan*? I mean no offense to you humans or your animalistic anti-intellectualism, of course. I’m simply particularly fastidious about cleanliness, you see.”

“We’re well aware that you never ‘mean offense,’” Executive Sakuma replied, cheek muscles twitching in thinly veiled aggravation. “But I would greatly appreciate it if you proved it by choosing your words a little more carefully.”

“I will consider it, though you ask much of me,” Nadal said. “The extent of my vernacular is simply vast, you see. One might say I wield the Japanese language with greater skill than even natives like yourselves. It’s inevitable that my verbiage and phrasing will often escape your grasp, and in such instances, I ask only for your understanding.”

Sakuma let out a dead laugh, somehow managing to scowl at the same time. “You sure do have a point. No way I could ever be as smart as you.”

Not too long ago, the executive officer had been with the Defense Force (or what was left of it, that is). And proudly too. He’d been straight as an arrow and unwaveringly loyal, but now that he was working with Nayuta directly, Sakuma had learned well the value of being able to question and criticize his superiors.

He was a strong individual, both outside and in, and a man of sincerity. So Nadal’s constant, unending snark made this escort mission especially painful for him.

Jurota Shiba, however, continued to drive unfazed. “We’re almost to the prefectural office, Speaker.”

“Very good.”

They’d landed on Shikoku from Wakayama Bay some time ago, and the electric vehicle hummed through Tokushima’s city streets. Sakuma sat in the passenger seat while Nadal monopolized the entire back cabin, donned in his best attire—that being, to him, a hooded robe favored by a society of Force-wielding knights from a famous science fiction film series. Combined with his buzzed golden hair and pointed ears, it suited the cross-world migrant oddly well. Sakuma was dressed in camo and Shiba in a blouson, making for a unique brand of motley crew.

This was actually their fourth trip to Tokushima City.

“Well? Was I not prophetic?” Nadal bragged to the two in front. “In less than two months, I said, Tokushima would abandon hope for aid from the provisional government in Fukuoka and instead turn to us. It was about time that we established a foothold ashore, so their timing was rather convenient.”

“It’s a good thing our reconnaissance went so well,” said Shiba. In fact, he had operated the surveillance drones on that very operation. “Without the settlement’s shipments of relief provisions, Tokushima’s all but kaput. They need food and medicine, so I imagine they’ll be more than receptive to the elves’ instructions.”

“They’re not ‘instructing’ anyone. They’re offering guidance and advice to Tokushima’s leaders,” Sakuma corrected. “Right, Speaker?”

Nadal nodded. “Yes, that sounds polite. Let’s go with that.”

“Speaker! You’re insulting the Japanese people!”

“Save your energy, Sakuma. Really,” Shiba said. “It’s just how he is.”

Soon enough, they had arrived at their destination: the Tokushima prefectural office. Together with the city hall and police station, it served as the city’s hub where most of the refugees now lived harsh yet relatively stable lives. Former government employees and police officers constituted the core of leadership, supplemented by volunteer residents.

The men that Speaker Nadal would be meeting with that day, though, were entirely unrelated.

Nadal took a seat in the meeting room and didn’t waste any time getting started. “Now, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

Shiba and Sakuma sat on either side of him. Across the table were five men, three in Ground Defense uniforms and one in his Air Defense dress blues. The last man wore a plain suit that was probably once quite luxurious but was now dirty and worn.

Nadal addressed the delegation once again. “These are dangerous times to be traveling all the way from Fukuoka. It must have been a trying journey. One can’t help but wonder what it is you’ve come so far to speak with Nayuta about.”

“It regards Three,” one of the officers replied. “We’ve received reports that Devicer Three has returned to your hands. We request that he be relinquished to the government at once!”

“Mhm,” Nadal hummed, narrowing his eyes. “The ‘government,’ you say. Correct me if I’m mistaken, but could you mayhaps be referring to that husk of an organization filled with former military and diet members? The one currently stationed in Fukuoka where the streets are teeming with homeless refugees from all over the country? Personally, I find it linguistically offensive to call such an ineffectual thing a ‘government.’”

“*Ineffectual*? That’s completely baseless!”

“History shows that many guerrilla factions that seized power in developing countries oftentimes use it to selfish ends, rather than for the good of the nation, ultimately leading to systemic corruption. Quite like you, in fact, come to think of it!”

“You knife-eared little…!” the officer snarled. “You people have no idea —”

“Oh, believe me,” Nadal interrupted. “I have *every* idea.”

Before the officer could scream something back, the one in the suit, a man of about thirty, spoke up. “You’re absolutely right, sir,” he said with a bright voice. “Fukuoka has done little good for the people thus far. But that’s why we’re doing everything we can to change that!” The young man’s passion shone brightly, vigor brimming from his slender form. It contrasted harshly with Nadal’s stark stoicism. “Which is why we need Devicer Three, Japan’s hero, to come home! So that we can properly express to him our gratitude, stand with him, and rebuild our nation!”

“Do go on,” said Nadal idly.

“Please!” the suited man pleaded. “Is there any way you could give us this chance?”

“Oh, finished? Well then, I could sit here and pick apart all the logical fallacies in your emotional appeal, but instead allow me to establish some facts for the sake of brevity. Two, in specific,” Nadal began. “Firstly, the Mark III Asura Frame is, by right, a treasure of the Elvish Foundation and not the property of the Japanese government. Thus, regardless of the authority with which you speak, you have no grounds to be making such demands.”

The clever sage looked around at the delegation. All had fallen silent. “Secondly, regarding Rudra’s Devicer… Ah, but perhaps you ought to hear it from the horse’s mouth.” He gestured to behind the men. “They’ve arrived just in time.”

All five turned around at once and gasped. They were ten floors up, and yet right outside the window they saw someone hovering in the air, arms crossed and gazing into the room. It was a black and gold warrior. Devicer Three and the Mark III Asura Frame.

“Hm.” Yu grunted emotionlessly inside the Frame. The voice changer emitted the sound in a genderless tone. “Sorry, but the military man was my predecessor. If you’re looking for someone to give orders to, keep moving.”

“What?!” one of the Fukuoka men shouted.

“I’m just a citizen doing what I think is right. A Samaritan, let’s say. I’ll help everyone I can wherever I can, but I don’t feel particularly motivated to involve myself with the army, if that’s all right with you.”

“But you’re Japanese!”

“I’m *speaking* Japanese, yes,” said Devicer Three. “But what proof do you have of my ethnicity beneath the armor?”

Yu gave the man an icy look under the mask. His outdated and shortsighted way of thinking was made abundantly evident by his assumption that only Japanese people knew how to speak the language.

Yu had been at the floating city Al’iksir just that morning, before shooting back up north to make the meeting. It was supposed to start a little past midday, and according to Nadal, there was a sixty-five percent chance that it was going to revolve around the return of Devicer Three. Fukuoka had contacted them to arrange it completely out of the blue four days prior, so Yu, having already made plans to go to Indonesia, decided he would just double back on his own after traveling south. He’d wanted to see the state of the world beyond Japan with his own eyes.

Ultimately, although it had been a short trip, he was glad he’d done it.

Now that he was back, though, Yu wasn’t excited to be greeted by a lousy bunch of military officers. Sakuma wore an uncomfortable expression, undoubtedly filled with conflicting emotions for his former colleagues.

An awkward air filled the room, until an inappropriately cheery voice drove it away. “This is wonderful!” cried the only man in a suit. “Then, if I understand your words correctly, you would rush to Fukuoka’s aid if a portal-keep were to appear? You would save us and defeat the Anomalies?”

“I fight for everyone,” the Devicer replied.

“Oh, thank you! Knowing that alone makes this whole endeavor worth it!” The suited man scrambled over and seized Yu’s armored hand with both of his own in a melodramatic display of gratitude, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re still Japan’s hero, even if you’re not the Devicer Three we know! There’s going to be dancing in the streets when the citizens of Fukuoka hear this news!”

“Mister Ijuin!” one of the officers snapped. “We have Se—”

The man clammed up all of a sudden, and the one called Ijuin scurried back and grabbed the old soldier’s shoulders. “I know,” he hissed quietly. “But it never hurts to have a few contingency plans in case *it* gets a little *out of hand*, does it?”

Unlike Yu’s own ears, the Mark III’s sensors were sensitive enough to pick up every word of their hushed conversation. “Mister Ijuin” appeared to have something of a silver tongue, and he knew how to take charge of a room.

Wait, Yu thought, Ijuin? Like that Ijuin?

Was it a coincidence? Or was he a relative of Yu's best friend?

Meanwhile, across the room, Speaker Nadal hummed in thought as he spectated from afar, stroking his notably beardless chin. Many elves had light body hair and were free from such facial adornments.

3

Tokushima, the capital of Tokushima Prefecture, was situated on the eastern coast of the island of Shikoku. Being the seat of regional government, it had essentially been the beating heart of the area, until the Evacuation saw the population drop to a tenth of its original size. Most everyone had either fled in search of safety or died during an Anomaly attack. The lack of proper medical facilities, too, was yet another reason for the exodus, turning injured victims into fatalities when they otherwise should have recovered.

Those that stayed, numbering some twenty thousand, lived quietly and in constant fear under the ever-present shadow of the portal-keeps. Food and other supplies were precious and strictly rationed; only a certain amount was allotted to each family. But this, of course, was hardly enough to sustain a society, and without constant bartering or doing business on the black market, one would struggle to get by.

"The people in charge must have their hands full," Natsuki Hatano remarked. "It's a lot quieter here than a lot of the other places I saw around Kansai. Granted, the place feels basically dead."

"It felt like you'd *wind up* dead at your old refugee town if you weren't too careful," Takamaru Ijuin countered.

The two of them had come to Shikoku on the same boat as Nadal. As…*unique* as the speaker was, he was also extremely important, so they were there as backup just in case anything went wrong. Natsuki had her Mark VI, Vritra, and Ijuin had learned to make good use of his nanomachines.

Natsuki wore her gaudy, peony-patterned furisode over a tank top, as usual, with the only other element to her less-than-modest look being a pair of denim shorts. The outlandish ex-high schooler looked at Ijuin with a lopsided smile. "I mean, everywhere needs some energy, good or bad. All the people here feel like they've just given up."

The younger of the duo had a strikingly pink hoodie on, but that was the only thing that stood out about him. He looked the part of an average, plus-sized fourteen-year-old.

Ijuin nodded at Natsuki's observation. "Can't really blame 'em. Must be hard to hope for rescue when it hasn't come for almost a year."

"Which is probably what our old pal Nadal wanted," Natsuki said bluntly. "Wait for them to get tired and stop looking for the light at the end of the

tunnel, and when they're at their lowest, show up and offer a way out. With strings attached."

"Welp, it worked. Got 'em on our side without much of a fight."

They came to the foot of a bridge straddling the Shinmachi River, near the prefectural office. The overpass was huge, with eight whole lanes for traffic, though not a single one was occupied. Ijuin looked over at the city, failing to spot more than a few pedestrians.

"Maybe all this cloak-and-dagger stuff's just part of how countries did their thing back in their world. If it was really Sengoku-style wars all the time, I mean," he wondered aloud. "I could see Lady Ein leadin' a few armies."

"Yeah, true... Hey!" Natsuki exclaimed. Her fierce eyes locked onto something across the bridge. "I just found lunch!"

"Wha? Hey, where're you going?!"

The furisode girl darted away, leaving the poor boy behind. All Ijuin could see at her destination was a dark dot lumbering in the distance. But Natsuki's physical abilities were literally extraordinary, enhanced to superhuman levels by the nano-augmentations in her body—and that included her eyesight.

The pointless meeting at the prefectural office over and done with, Yu took off into the sky, still armorized. Flying gently and quietly, he switched on the optical camouflage, vanishing from sight.

"Now where are Ijuin and Natsuki?" he murmured. "This way, I think."

He'd received their general location over commlink. All he had to do was trace their signal with the Frame and fly that way until he could spy them from above.

Yu turned his gaze to the area near a large bridge. "There they are. Wait, what's that?"

There were shops and houses all over, but Tokushima was practically a ghost town these days. Or at least, it was *supposed* to be. A crowd of about thirty or forty people had gathered on the street at one end of the bridge.

The Mark III's sensors picked up something, and a window appeared on the Head Mounted Display in Yu's visor. In it were Natsuki's and Ijuin's smiling faces, though he could tell the entire gathering seemed to be in a good mood. People young and old of every gender and every complexion were grinning and chatting merrily.

"Wonder what's going on."

Yu landed behind a building and de-armorized, soon realizing his T-shirt and shorts were a little cold for Japan in May. He was worming his way through the mass of people when something tickled his nose. They were grilling.

"Natsuki! Ijuin!" he called out. "What is this?"

"Hello, good sir!" Ijuin called back, beaming. "You've impeccable timing!"

“I got my hands on some good stuff and thought we might as well let everyone else partake of the fruits of our labor, shall we say!” Natsuki said.

A big, blue tarp lay spread out behind them, two large and presumably dead boars lying on it. A number of tables and cooking appliances were lined along the road, and a sizable pot boiled over a gas range while hunks of meat sizzled on grates over a charcoal fire.

Ijuin pointed back at the boars with his thumb. “Natsuki found ’em! Chased one down and kicked it in the head. Took it right out. Punched the second one, and she *suplexed* the third!”

“You hunted wild boar with your *bare hands*?!” Yu exclaimed.

Natsuki smiled bashfully. “Did I never mention I studied kenpo?”

“Oh yeah, you said your dad did stage fighting and action choreography,” recalled Yu. “He taught you how to fight and stuff, right?”

For all intents and purposes, though, knowing how to fight didn’t have quite as much to do with this particular feat as Natsuki’s innate physical prowess. Unlike Yu, she was strong without a suit of armor.

The woman of the hour glanced towards a house. The third boar corpse hung from the ceiling of an open garage, and a middle-aged man was in the middle of skillfully butchering it.

“I’m not so good at that stuff like you and Ein,” she said. “So I went around knockin’ on doors asking for help in exchange for some of the score. Eventually someone found us an outdoorsy guy, and now it’s kind of a whole thing.”

“Le petit banquet!” Ijuin cheered.

Their paper plates were piled high with a mountain of grilled pork.

“Here, join the bourgeoisie,” said Natsuki. She picked up a piece with her chopsticks and held it out for Yu.

“Oh, thanks,” he replied. He opened his mouth and accepted the offer. “Wow, that’s good!”

The flight from Indonesia had been long, and he hadn’t stopped for food. Yu had been running on empty all day. The fat melted in his mouth and his hunger amplified the juicy flavors tenfold. Only after demolishing an entire plate did he stop to wonder if he really should have let Natsuki feed him.

She giggled impishly, then winked. “Don’t tell Ein.”

Yu’s heart skipped a beat. “Uh, r-right.”

Ijuin was too busy stuffing his face to notice anything that had transpired. They’d had the privilege of eating real game for some time, but for him, lean deer meat couldn’t hold a candle to fatty pork.

Once his plate was clean, Ijuin said, “So apparently it’s been gettin’ dangerous havin’ so few people around, since it makes it easier for animals to creep in from the mountains. Nothing much they can do about it either, ’cause bullets are so valuable.”

“The hunter guy said they prefer to save them,” said Natsuki.

“In case of the Anomalies,” Yu surmised.

The excitement surrounding the feast was understandable, considering how rare good things tended to happen these days. Tokushima was hungry and filled with danger, both from this world and beyond. So Yu joined them, taking the chance to eat and drink and be merry while they could.

And it was a good thing that he had.

Silence fell over the crowd as a jade curtain fell over the sky. Yu looked up at the billowing aurora and shuddered.

The flying portal-keep was coming.

4

A stone palace loomed atop a levitating mass of earth, but to Yu, it had long lost its wonder. He had grown quite used to seeing its ghostly form hovering across the horizon back during his confined days at Maizuru. From winter to spring, it had haunted the bay.

In fact, Yu was so intimately familiar with the portal-keep that he even knew its master, an archmage by the name of Quldald of the Whirlwind. He remembered how handsome the archmage's features were, how striking they'd been. A history of bloody battles and bloodier victories in the other world comprised his character, his chivalry, and above all, the fear he could elicit in his enemies. He was, ostensibly, the very definition of a hero.

What Yu didn't understand, though, was why it was so quiet. The so-called "Castle Whirlwind" didn't dispatch a single Anomaly. It simply floated there.

"Weird," Ijuin muttered, staring at the display in his HMD goggles. "What're they doin' up there?"

Yu, already having re-armorized, saw the same aerial video feed being streamed to both of them by a lone MUV Bumblebee. In it, they noted eight floating giants surrounding the solitary castle's ramparts, each easily twelve or thirteen meters tall and with burly muscles rippling under pallid skin. They were all clothed in simple white tunics and pants. Turbans adorned their heads and golden bracelets decorated their wrists.

"Sorta look like the kinda people who'd live in the desert in our world," Ijuin commented.

"Their boss wears one of those turbans too," said Yu.

"Maybe it's hot back home," Natsuki supposed.

The three of them looked up at Tokushima's sky from the top of a random building. Backdropped by the shimmering aurora, the airborne palace was an uncanny spectacle.

"The Mark III's got their names," Ijuin said. "They're called cloud giants, and… Ugh, the note says they're spellcasters."

In other words, they couldn't sit around and wait for them to make the first move.

Yu turned to Natsuki, nodded, and switched on the voice changer. "I'll take point."

“Right,” said Natsuki. “While you do your thing, I’ll be stayin’ quiet. See you inside the castle!” She strengthened her grip on the Green Dragon Crescent Blade—the glass cannon Mark VI Asura Frame, Vritra.

Yu took flight, the antigravity lifters carrying him swiftly into the air. He broke Mach 4 in an instant and reached Castle Whirlwind’s altitude just as quickly. The palace upon the body of rock levitated before him at 180 meters above the ground, and the eight cloud giants turned their harsh, piercing eyes towards the intruder all at once. But Yu was calm. Their gazes were those of wary gatekeepers, not of bloodthirsty attackers.

“Hail, warrior of black and gold, and well met!” someone called out to him. Yu looked up to find the archmage standing upon a palace wall. “I was just about to send a herald your way! How magnanimous of you to spare me the trouble.”

A blue robe cloaked the man’s body, and a turban of the same hue was wrapped around his head. He wielded a staff, thus embodying the very image of a classic magician. On his face, he wore an intrepid grin.

At that altitude, the winds were violent, and despite the two being separated by a solid thirty meters or more, the mage’s greeting resounded clearly throughout the heavens. Yu didn’t even need to resort to the Asura Frame’s sensors to hear him. Such were the astonishing powers the archmages possessed. But Yu wasn’t the same as the last time they had met.

“I assume you wanted to see me for a reason,” he said, undaunted by the alien champion.

“Well now!” Quldald’s eyes lit up upon hearing Yu’s pitch-shifted voice. “You’ve grown, yes. I can feel it. It’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it? War. Nothing changes a man, makes him stronger, quite like the blood-soaked soil and the wailing winds of a battlefield.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not how I see things,” Yu replied flatly. “Anyone looking for the bright side of conflict is a fool, and whoever might be celebrating the current state of the world is an enemy of Devicer Three.”

“Yes, indeed,” Quldald said. “And so it ought to be between mortal enemies such as you and I. For that shall be the stage upon which we decide whose might is greater!” Suddenly, the archmage leaned back from his impassioned posture and relaxed his shoulders. “Though, as eager as I am, my only business this time is to ascertain something. Rest assured, we will have a test of strength, but the true trial must come later.”

“And who’s gonna stop me if I refuse?”

“Now, now, all I ask is a mere taste. A meager fifty percent of your power, if you will.”

Quldald swung his staff, and a small Yu-sized twister suddenly spawned out of thin air. It whirled towards him and the Mark III as fast as the wind itself, but the anti-magic shell activated quickly. For an instant, as the twister swallowed him whole and continued to churn his body around like a

laundry machine, Yu felt a sensation like he was being torn to shreds, Frame and all. But both the tornado and his torment soon dissipated.

"Yes, I should have known it would take more," Quldald remarked. "Then let us see just how *much* more!"

The mage flailed his staff back and forth, summoning one twister after another. Each miniature cyclone flew right towards Yu and assailed him from every direction. The anti-magic shell worked well enough at first, but it didn't last long.

Yu groaned in pain. "It's taking longer and longer to dispel them!" A few seconds of agony was one thing, but the constant barrage was beginning to wear on his body beneath the armor. "How many twisters are there? 137...?!"

Yu's eyes widened in shock. Meanwhile, Quldald was ceaselessly waving his staff, adding to their already overwhelming numbers. It didn't look like he would be stopping anytime soon.

"Fine!" Yu snapped.

He accelerated, exploding past Mach 1, 2, 3, *and* 4. If he couldn't deal with them all, then he'd just weave his way through them. The Mark III was the King of the Storm—the skies and its subjects were at his heel.

But just as Yu was bending speed to his will, a blast shook the air. The Devicer yelped in surprise. The explosion blew him away before he could see where it had come from.

"Such agility humbles me, truly," Quldald murmured emphatically. "How long it's been since an opponent last forced my hand to use my supersonic blast technique."

A window popped up before Yu's eyes, listing the names of the spells the mage had just used—Force Tornado and Hyper Sonic Blast. A glance at the accompanying tooltip explained that the latter was a kind of magic that could create powerful shock waves faster than the speed of sound. Without the anti-magic shell, Yu wouldn't have been launched away. Instead, he would have been instantly decimated beyond recognition.

Yu gasped. "Wait, that's just like the move Rudra and I use!"

Just like his supersonic charge attack.

"I-Ichinose!" Ijuin came over the commlink. "You said that guy calls himself 'the Whirlwind' or something, yeah?!"

"Wrong name, Ijuin. I'm armorized," Yu replied.

"Forget that for a minute, man! I think that archmage is gonna have a lot of the same stuff as the Mark III! You both control the winds!"

"I had a feeling."

"Yeah," said Ijuin. "Wind includes the air and atmosphere, so he'll be able to move crazy fast and whip out sonic-based attacks! At least, I think so!"

It seemed the two of them had the same suspicions.

Yu reactivated the antigravity lifters and flipped himself right side up again, shooting skyward to avoid the encroaching swarm of tornadoes. But

as if that weren't enough, the portal-keep's gates yawned open, revealing a blue beast—a scaled lizard of almost thirty meters in length, with the wings of a bat.

Taking to the skies was a blue dragon. The flying reptile opened its maw and a stream of crackling lightning burst forth.

But not towards the Mark III.

"Whoa, that one's for me!"

"Natsuki!" Yu shouted.

Levitating in the air, Natsuki held the blade end of the Green Dragon out towards the surge of electricity rushing towards her. The anti-magic shell expanded out from the tip in the form of a dome, and the dragon's breath attack was stopped dead at the protective barrier. A laser beam fired from the guandao's edge as the dragon attempted to maneuver behind Natsuki, but the attack just barely missed its target.

"Welp, guess I'll handle things here, Three!" she said over the commlink.

"Got it!"

While the Mark VI was a handheld Asura Frame, it still came equipped with antigravity lifters which granted the power of flight to its wielder. That was how they had gotten the drop on Scullchance in their battle with her, and they had hoped to do the same to Quldald. Yu would attract the enemy's attention while Natsuki would approach quietly and wait for the right time to land a surprise attack. Now that she was out in the open, though, that plan was done for.

"I'm certain it bears no explanation to you, black and gold warrior, that lightning is but a boon companion to the wind," Quldald said, suddenly appearing nearby. "You will find that I am well versed in such incantations!"

Yu clenched his teeth in frustration.

The mage raised his staff, and a sphere of light began to radiate from it. In no time at all, the ball of lightning had grown to the size of a human and been sent flying straight at Rudra. Yu nimbly shook the attack off, only for another swarm of twisters to hone in on his location.

"Rudra! Ein left you some Gospel Codes, didn't she?" Yu asked his partner. "Prepare the Doomsday Book! I'll buy us some time!"

The Prayer Wheel at his waist hummed as it began to spin at faster and faster speeds. Not long later came a chorus of men and women, singing this time with more poignant weight than usual, "Gate! Gate! Paragate! Gate! Gate! Paragate!"

Along with the song rose Rudra's spirit, the divine determination of the god of the wind given mechanical form. Yu, meanwhile, dodged and laced between Quldald's onslaught of cyclones and lightning, stalling long enough for the string of English text to finally finish scrolling across his visor.

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[System Now Booting Doomsday Book "VIDYA-MANTRA RUDRA2"]
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"Now!" he commanded.

The windbeast began to manifest, gusts coming together to shape into the wispy form of a panther. In its wake would follow a giant, swirling tornado that the creature would use to tear its prey asunder.

The Mark III had recited the hymn to summon the creature all on its own. The lyrics had appeared before Yu in a separate window.

The sinners of the trailokya know not their sin.
Such as the fools of the four wombs know not their folly.
In darkness we are born, to darkness we return, and to darkness we are born anew.

"My vassals!" Quldald cried out. "Go forth, dwellers of the clouds!"

At his order, the eight cloud giants that had been quietly observing the battle up to then started to deploy. They each placed their hands together simultaneously and uniformly, forming triangles in their palms.

Yu flinched. Ein had taught him about those sorts of gestures before. They were mudra hand signs, meant to heighten one's senses during spellcasting. It had only been a matter of time before those Anomalies finally decided to make their move, and now they were beginning to chant.

"Shoot!" Yu hissed.

Eight triangles glowed in the sky before falling one after the other onto Yu's trump card—the wind beast. The trinities of light enclosed the feline's legs and bound them tightly. Struggle as it might, the windbeast couldn't get the restraints to so much as budge.

Yu trembled in frustration and uncertainty. "He had a counterplay to the Doomsday Book this whole time!"

Quldald had done his research. Clearly, he was every bit the tactician as his proud and late comrade Scullchance. And more.

"Not good, not good!" Ijuin watched the fight unfold from his HMD goggles back at the roof of the building, and he didn't much like what he saw. "Man, this is seriously rough without Lady Ein here! She'd have a Gospel Code for this situation, I know it!"

In truth, they had all been fearing this exact scenario ever since Yu told them about the Devicer from China. The girl knew this would be his weakness, and she had her eyes on Ein because of it.

"I've gotta figure this out or we're screwed."

The Replicant girl had taught him something before leaving. Ijuin stared deeply at the Shikoku sky, through the haunting aurora towards what lay beyond, remembering Ein's words.

"Seek the sun, Ijuin," she had said. "Not the one that burns, but the one that persists just the same. Sense its presence. You've learned well how to use the key of prajna—that is, your nanomachines. I believe you can do it."

What Ijuin was attempting was meant to somehow substitute for the lack of a Replicant. He opened his eyes wide and strained his ears, doing everything he could to hone his senses to a fine point.

"Sense its presence," he echoed. "Yeah, right. I'm not some ascetic monk here! Couldn't you have given me something a little less esoteric?"

And then it happened. He felt it. Waves of some kind, propagating from the sky. No—more specifically, from the southwest.

"It can't be," he murmured. "It's Avalo. It's the coordinates for Devicer Nine and Lady Ein's friend!"

5

Across the world, at the top of Al'iksir's Central Tower was an observation lounge encircled by three hundred and sixty degrees of glass. The Java Sea stretched out in every direction, and towards the south, one could make out the buildings of Jakarta's harbor, the only sign of human life in the entire expanse.

"I was told Japan would be in this direction," Ein muttered. She gazed out the window towards the northeast. "If it's coming, it should be soon."

Before departing, she had left Ijuin with a few words.

"The ninth Asura, Virochana, rules the sun and all that it sends forth as the King of Dawn. Its Replicant, the one who stands at its side, is the clone of the Fire Bloodline's liege—the Sun King. Together, they defend the Avalo satellite, itself an extension of the Mark IX that operates by way of a solar furnace. Although impossible to others, I believe that you may be able to sense Avalo's resplendence with your nanomachines."

"The key of Perfect Wisdom will guide your prayers to the astral heavens."

"Beseech Avalo's favor in the name of my sworn companions—Rudra of the wind and the Dragon King Vritra."

Commlinks only worked within a range of a few kilometers. Unlike the electromagnetic waves typical cell phones used, resonance between nanofactors was impossible over larger distances. Those few nano-augmented individuals who had manifested their abilities to an appropriate level, however, could communicate with Avalo directly—thirty-six thousand kilometers beyond the clouds. This, to a lesser degree, was essentially what Ein and the Replicants did to download and provide Gospel Codes to the Asura Frames.

Through this process, as long as they were sufficiently awakened to their nano-abilities, one could potentially use Avalo as a medium to transmit data across a much wider range, much like a satellite phone. All the Mark III and VI would need were the satellite's coordinates to establish a link.

"Yu and Natsuki must keep their minds focused on the battle. So the role falls to you, Ijuin. This, you must do."

And so Ein waited. A battle was underway in Tokushima, and they could need her at any moment.

“Lady Ein!” At last, the commlink from afar came. “Three and Natsuki are gettin’ slammed out there! Both Frames are already connected to Avalo, so just waiting on you!”

“Well done, Ijuin!” Ein replied.

They didn’t need her, necessarily. Not even the Doomsday Book required her presence. But Asura Frames were limited to carrying only four onboard Gospel Codes at a time, and they lacked the disposition for the kind of arcane formulation that the holy blood of elvish royalty so excelled at. An artificial god of destruction was, after all, still a man-made machine.

Indeed, the Wheel of Orison’s *truest* miracles were those born of the empowering hymns spoken by a scion of the old bloodlines.

—O Traveler. Heed me, O Traveler,
—Wanderer of the realm and distances vast,
—Rejoice, O Siddha. The awakening has begun.

“We got it, Three!”

“Ein’s Gospel Code! Now’s our chance for a counterattack!”

The two Devicers had been backed into a corner—Yu by the twisters that now numbered over three hundred, and Natsuki by the blue dragon that had, for the high schooler’s first time ever, stretched her to her limits. But with Ein’s voice reaching them from across the world, their minds became one.

On Rudra’s belt and at the ferrule of the Green Dragon Crescent Blade were relics with the potential to unleash an unlimited amount of magical and electrical energy. And they had begun to turn with ever-increasing velocity.

“Rudra! Call your knight once more!” Yu shouted. “Grant it the power it needs to run wild!”

“Let’s pull out a trick of our own, Vritra!” cried Natsuki.

Yu willed the Frame to deliver energy to the windbeast, still bound by the glowing trinities. Meanwhile, Natsuki distanced herself from the dragon and stared it down while she hovered with the guandao in hand.

The drake circled her slowly, searching for an opening to strike. It wouldn’t find it, though, because Natsuki had surrounded herself completely with the Mark VI’s defense field. The faintly gleaming sphere was impenetrable, even to the dragon’s fangs and claws, but that included her own blade. As long as the field was up, Natsuki couldn’t go on the offensive.

She gripped the Green Dragon’s shaft. As she did so, Ein’s Gospel Code from all the way in Indonesia echoed in her ears. Resonating with her nanofactors.

—No earth nor heaven upon which to stand.

—Joy, as fleeting as the life and dharma for which we exist.

—Hark, for the Yuan's sword is but a lightning's shade when it sunders the spring breeze.

These hauntingly stirring phrases were but the prelude to annihilation.

"Let's go!" Natsuki shouted. "Time to show off our first Doomsday Book, Vritra! Chapter one, Draco Blade!"

Suddenly, the force field surrounding her lit up like a flame, shining so brightly that it made the dim gleam from before seem like a fading cinder in comparison. Natsuki thrust out the guandao and propelled herself forward, barrier and all. Drawing a trail of light behind her like a comet, she streaked through the air before colliding with the dragon and burying herself into the beast's gut as if she were trying to bore through it. Her target was paralyzed.

With a great roar, Natsuki plunged Vritra's gruesome blade forward. Where the barrier should have impeded her attack, a tiny slit opened, and the guandao fit right through. She felt the edge of her weapon pierce flesh.

"Now!" she yelled.

Natsuki, shining with her force field like a shooting star, continued her charge. Pushing. Gouging. Forcing the blue dragon along at the head of the nucleus. Until finally, she burst through the beast, goring a hole from stomach to spine.

"Not done yet!"

Even after the dragon was slain, Natsuki didn't pause for a second. She shifted her trajectory straight to the portal-keep. The eight cloud giants fell as the dragon did, and Natsuki swiftly left each of their impaled corpses behind in the tail of her comet of death.

But before Natsuki's assault had even begun, Rudra's knight was beginning to stir in its bindings. Infused with the wind Asura's rapidly spiking energy, the windbeast shattered its radiant shackles.

The beast roared, and as it lept, the winds surged in its wake. Rudra's servant swirled into a violent tornado, a gusting and unstoppable whirlwind of air that swallowed the smaller twisters whole. The very same spellbound cyclones that had been on Yu's heels the entire battle.

"Attack, windbeast!" Yu commanded.

With the swarm of twisters dispelled, the giant tornado then turned its momentum towards Quldald's Castle Whirlwind.

"Hail, my comrades!" Quldald bellowed. "Come to me from scorching earth and blistering gales!"

A blast of air mixed with sand spewed from the portal-keep's open gate. The gust was so sweltering that a single breeze could have seared human skin and left behind nothing but a roasted corpse.

The windbeast's tempest faltered against the burning sandblast.

"Rudra! Full power!" Yu ordered.

“Blow, winds of Ariadon’na! Bring the hero of Earth to his knees as you did so many nations before!” Quldald beseeched.

Slowly, ever so gradually, the great tornado lurched towards the palace in the sky, but for every centimeter gained, the torrid winds howling out of the keep seemed to push it back just as much. This went on for several seconds before both gales dissipated, their powers spent.

Quldald chuckled. His voice was shockingly close by. “Yes,” he murmured. Yu whipped around and found the mage floating before him, entirely unaided. “Yes, I knew it. *You*, the royal blood’s chosen, are the better. It would behoove me to allow some time for my little project to reach its completion.”

“What, and we’re supposed to let you get away?” Yu shot back.

“Yeah!” Natsuki said, flying up with the Mark VI. “C’mon, good lookin’! Let’s settle this! Right here, right now!”

Quldald squinted at the conspicuous girl and nodded in admiration for her spirit. “A reasonable proposal, to be sure. However, I must insist. There is more revelry to be had in our rivalry.” He hoisted his staff to the sky, and then Yu realized—this staff was metal and small. His usual one had been wooden. “Starcaller, give these heroes something to occupy them.”

A window popped into Yu’s visor, and he blanched. “What?”

It was a video feed, sent by a surveillance droid that had been patrolling the area. Something was breaking through the clouds and descending fast. *Very* fast. At fifteen kilometers a second, to be exact. An estimated collision course marked the point of impact thirty-two kilometers southeast of Tokushima.

The burning mass hit the ocean, shock waves of violently displaced air exploded out, and the water’s surface mushroomed into the clouds in an utterly terrifying cascade. Yu and Natsuki could feel the blast, even as far from the epicenter as they were.

“Ah, curses,” Quldald said jokingly. “I meant to drop it on the city, but alas. As you can see, summoning stars with this old tool of mine is tricky business!”

“Star...?” Yu muttered. “You don’t mean a *meteor*?!”

Yu had seen videos of one that had fallen in Russia. The explosion had been massive, and it greatly resembled the one they’d just witnessed.

Quldald vanished, leaving Yu’s question unanswered and his voice on the wind. “*Until we meet again! Await my return with bated breath, heroes of Earth!*”

The aurora shimmered away, and the floating castle slowly faded into a spectral mirage.

“Yu, this is bad!” Natsuki exclaimed. Uncharacteristic panic tinged her voice for once. “Who knows what other magic artifacts they have? The archmages could be hiding stuff just like our Asura Frames!”

Leo Makishima lingered near the coast of Tokushima. The place had once been a beach, but he was not there to brood at the endless ocean. No, what he was looking at was not the sea, but a digital window in the back of his eyelids. The nanomachines in his body were streaming aerial footage captured by a surveillance droid directly to him, and he analyzed the Mark III's movements, the Mark VI's, and the way their Devicers fought.

The battle had just come to an end. A meteor had crashed into the ocean, and the archmage had gotten away.

Leo opened his eyes. "Replicants really do make all the difference," he murmured. He reflected on what he'd seen, comparing the data to his own capabilities. "If I can get one of those elf upgrades for myself, I'll finally be a match for archmages. Hey, Kiriko."

"Uh-huh?"

The girl standing behind him was an eighteen-year-old girl named Kiriko Kaji. She'd been nano-augmented at the same research facility as Leo in west Japan, and now she worked for Fukuoka government's military as a warrant officer. Technically, this made her Leo's superior, since he had refused to take a rank.

That did not, however, stop him from having an attitude.

"Tell the military to get Devicer Three to Fukuoka," he said. "And his gear too. That Replicant."

"Leo." Kiriko sighed. "Don't act like you didn't hear all that." They had listened in on the entire meeting between Nayuta's representative and the Fukuoka delegation. A MUV Designator auxiliary droid in the pocket of one of the officers had been bugged to allow them to hear every word. "That new Three guy's like you. They're not gonna listen to anyone. You need to get a grip."

Her hair was dyed a light, creamy blonde and cut into a bob. The Ground Defense's uniform looked horribly unsuited to a girl of her demeanor, and in a better world, she would have been in college right around now.

Despite appearances, though, she was still nano-augmented, and that made her valuable. Her manifestation level wasn't too bad either. So Leo tolerated her presence.

"You're not thinking," he said, a twinge of irritation coloring his tone. "Didn't *you* hear? They'll go to whoever calls them."

"Is that what they said? It sounded to me like it was more about protecting people, not that you can just—"

"Exactly," Leo interrupted. "I need the army to grab Three's attention for me."

"How're you going to manage *that*?" Kiriko asked.

"That's the easy part. Do what I say and it'll work out."

"Dude, we've seriously got to work on that attitude!"

"Be quiet. I'm thinking," Leo snapped. His voice dropped to a murmur. "The only thing that matters right now is making sure I get stronger. Stronger than anyone."

The war would never end for him, not if he wasn’t the strongest. So it was frustrating that he remembered so little about his loss to the mage called Quldald. In the bitterness of defeat was always a lesson to be learned, as well as the anger that kept Leo on his feet. The chagrin that carried him to the battlefield.

Chapter 3: The Asura of Flashfire

1

Kitakyushu, Moji Ward. 7 a.m. Yu Ichinose, Ein, Takamaru Ijuin, and Natsuki Hatano had arrived at the city from Nayuta by boat, and the plan was to proceed to Fukuoka via an electric car they'd brought with them on the ship.

"Weird, not having Aliya around," Ijuin commented.

"We've all been together so long," said Yu.

Two weeks had passed since the trip down to Jakarta and the floating city. Ein had returned, but Aliya Todo was still hard at work experimenting with the Mark VIII Asura Frame. Apparently, things hadn't been going very well, and she was still in the trial-and-error testing phase.

May had turned to June, and that meant the rainy season was approaching. The air was getting hotter and more humid with every passing day.

Natsuki grinned idly. "Didn't expect to get an SOS this soon," she said. "Wonder what the deal is with that fire Anomaly that's givin' 'em trouble."

"You don't think it's the same as the one in Jakarta, do you?" Yu thought back to the ifrit and how powerful it had been. "Those things were really giving the Mark V's Devicer trouble."

"Please, you have Natsuki and me," Ein declared proudly. "I don't want to trivialize potential danger with levities, of course, but remember you do not fight alone."

"Yeah, we were pretty much *screwed* without you!" Natsuki laughed.

"The Asura Frame's connection to the satellite doesn't drop unless you specifically reset it, right?" Ijuin said, taking the passenger seat of the car. "That's good, 'cause hell if I know how I'd manage to do that again."

Natsuki plopped into the driver's seat as they spoke while Yu and Ein sat in the back together. The vehicle was a roomy SUV with enough space for a five-person family.

"Well," said Ein as Natsuki pulled out and started on their way, "I technically *could* have connected the Asuras to Avalo before I left."

Ijuin whipped around towards the back seat. "Seriously?!"

"I was interested in seeing the next step in your awakening, so I neglected to mention it."

"Okay, next time, maybe keep the curiosity to yourself!" Ijuin hollered. "I'm perfectly satisfied with my level of awakeness, thank you!"

Ein smiled placidly. Yu glanced at his beautiful partner, regarding the grace of her expression.

"Nadal was saying some weird stuff before we left, huh?" Yu remarked.

"Ah, his request to 'use the opportunity to advance reconnaissance efforts in the region.' Doubtless he expects results from our nano-abilities."

Ein thought for a moment. “It seems Nadal suspects there’s already an Asura in Fukuoka.”

“But that can’t be possible,” Yu said. “People would be talking. There’d be rumors, and no way the government wouldn’t be propagandizing the whole thing.”

Yu wasn’t convinced. Ein, however, frowned. “It’s not as far-fetched as you might think. What if announcing that Japan was in possession of this particular Asura were to be politically dangerous? The government wouldn’t want to risk losing what little foreign aid it still gets over an international incident.”

“That’s making a lot of assumptions, though.”

“Think of it this way,” Ijuin interjected. “Say a Devicer gets wounded in battle, and Japan’s Defense Force rescues them. Now say they die under the knife. What then? Who’s responsible?”

“I guess that could happen,” Yu said. His friend’s logic made a certain amount of sense. “They’d want to hide it, and then they could just keep the Frame for themselves.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time Japan’s brushed a few inconvenient truths under the rug,” Natsuki added.

They were exiting the harbor and coming into downtown now. The decision to make the trip by road had been a purposeful one. Traveling over water or with the Asura Frame made it difficult to really see the state of the world, and they wanted to witness it with their own eyes.

Ijuin rolled down his window and stuck his head out. “Definitely not as waterlogged as Kanto or Kansai,” he remarked. The streets of the coastal city were deserted, as were its buildings. “Shikoku and Kyushu still got their normal coastlines for the most part. Scenery doesn’t even look much different, and the roads seem pretty clear.”

“I’m glad we’re not dealing with a mess of knocked-over trees and power lines like up in the mountains,” Natsuki commented.

“Why’s no one living around here?” Yu wondered. “I figured there’d be people, considering how Fukuoka’s apparently crammed with refugees.”

“You’re sort of on the right track. Guess where all the food and supplies got hauled off to?” Natsuki replied. “The provisional government sent what they had left of the Force to run around Kyushu, Shikoku, and the closer parts of Honshu and snatch up anything they could grab. With guns as a bit of an ‘incentive’ for the locals to cooperate.”

“Guns?!” exclaimed Yu.

“Of course, it’s kinda hard to live on your own after all your junk gets stolen. Long story short, that’s why everyone wound up in Fukuoka.”

“That’s straight up robbery!” Ijuin shouted.

The kabukimono samurai girl shrugged her shoulders. “That’s one of the nicer ways of putting it.” She had supposedly been all over Kansai, so she had a better grasp of the situation than Yu or any of the others who’d been trapped at Maizuru. “Once they *get* to Fukuoka, though, they find out

there's not enough food to go around. Granted, I hear the folks in charge call it 'rationing.'"

"Is that not what it is?" Yu asked. He had a feeling he knew the answer.

"Well, okay, so, this is just what I've heard," Natsuki said, "but this guy I knew said he meets with the government every now and then, and some of the folks in charge there have mouths as big as their egos. He told me he heard someone talking about how much easier things'd be once the refugees started to starve."

Ein folded her arms. "Hm. It sounds to me like a select few in power are living like kings at the expense of those deemed less deserving. Does that sound about right?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself. Way I hear it, folks in the military especially have it made," Natsuki said.

Yu breathed a sigh. They were just rumors, but none of it was hard to believe. It seemed that no matter where they went, the ugliest sides of humanity were always there waiting.

The road from Maizuru to Osaka had been littered with fallen trees, utility poles, and other debris, forcing them to stop dozens of times along the way. Northern Kyushu's highways, however, were comparatively clear. Even the smaller streets outside of the urban center weren't too bad.

So when Ijuin asked to stop the car, it was not out of necessity. Only frivolity.

"Hey, guys, so we've got these lunches," he suddenly spoke up suggestively. "But since we're finally on land again, whaddya say we get ourselves some meat? Ein's got that rifle!"

"I suppose I see no harm in making use of the opportunity," the designated huntress said.

The one with the gun had made her decision, so that was that. They pulled over on the side of the road and hopped out of the car. They were still in Kitakyushu city limits, just a ways out into the country.

Parting shrubs and bushes, everyone headed into the forest adjoining the street.

"If I were a deer, this is definitely where I'd be," Natsuki said. "Saw a monkey earlier, so we're bound to find something."

"Large game will weigh us down," Ein replied frankly. "A few birds would be perfect for our purposes."

The Replicant girl skulked through the woods, eyeing the tree canopies carefully. A Type 20 assault rifle hung from a belt slung around her shoulder, but she moved as if the weight were nothing to her. Yu followed her from behind, unarmed, careful not to alert her prey. He didn't need a weapon if he was going to Fukuoka as Devicer Three, after all.

And then a shriek pierced the air.

"Help! Please! Someone!"

It sounded like a young man. Yu and the three others exchanged glances.

“Natsuki! Ein! Let’s go!” he said. “Meet up with us when you can, Ijuin!”

As Yu kicked into a run, his unathletic friend’s voice trailed behind him. “S-Sorry!”

The girls were already ahead of him. They swerved around trees and tore through the undergrowth as they awkwardly sprinted along the mountain path. When they broke through the treeline and came to a clearing, the group found a man who looked about thirty cowering beneath what Yu thought was a bear at first. Whatever the beast was, it was covered in thick fur and taller than any human, but it had the face of a horned owl. Its mouth was pointed into a beak, and two long ears poked out of its head like antlers.

“It’s an Anomaly, Ein!” Yu exclaimed, quickly armorizing. But not his entire body. This time, the black and gold nano-armor covered only his right forearm—a feat he’d learned how to do somewhat recently.

Ein readied the Type 20 with perfect form and pulled the trigger. The bullet sank into the back of the owl-like creature’s head. Yu held up his armored hand and fired a volley of calcium bullets from his fingers with the hyper-compressed air gun. Each bore deep into the monster’s body.

“My turn!” Natsuki cheered.

The ex-high schooler, also unarmed, leaped into the air towards the bear-owl thing, spinning as she did. Carried by momentum, she slammed her leg into the creature’s thick neck, and a gruesome *crack* resounded as its cervical spine instantly shattered.

The Anomaly was summarily neutralized.

Ein approached the dazed young man on the ground. “Excuse me, would you mind if I asked what you’re doing out here?”

While his partner handled the talking (which she was better at anyway), Yu discreetly de-armorized his arm. He’d made sure to fire from the man’s blind spot, so his secret was safe. Devicer Three’s identity could not be revealed.

2

The Anomaly that Yu and the others had taken out was officially designated “owlbear.” After the encounter, the man joined them in the car and showed them to where he lived.

“Thank you so much. I thought my luck had finally run out,” he said.

They’d come to a small village in the mountains, but all of its original residents were already gone. The man, his wife, and their children were living in an abandoned house there with what looked to be about five other families. He told the travelers their story.

“You came from Fukuoka?!” Ijuin asked, bewildered.

“It was either leave or starve to death,” one of the refugees replied. “There’s just no food, no medicine…” The kids were off playing together while the adults had come to discuss their plight with Yu and his friends. “When we left, we learned we could make a better life for ourselves out in the wilderness.”

“We were off in the mountains around Maizuru, so I feel you there,” Ijuin said.

“We’ve been having more problems with wandering Anomalies lately, though. To say nothing of the wild animals, of course.”

“But lemme guess,” Natsuki chimed in. “It’s still better than Fukuoka.”

“Easily,” the man said. “Things aren’t without hardship by any measure, but we’re a lot better off out here.”

Ein and Yu were too busy cooking lunch to join the conversation. The girl was butchering chickens and bulbuls in the yard of the house they’d gathered at, while Yu manned the stove as usual.

“I bet the chickens were probably kept here in town before they went feral,” Yu noted.

“A female would have been useful for a steady supply of eggs, but this will do just as well,” Ein replied. “The children are surely malnourished. A feast will do them all some good.”

“How about we roast them over some charcoal?”

They just so happened to have access to a dutch oven and the appropriate fuel. Yu spread open the plucked chicken’s stomach and stuffed it full of potatoes and carrots farmed by the refugees, as well as some dropwort he’d found growing nearby for the fragrance. He finished by seasoning the meat with salt and garlic before sticking it in the preheated dutch oven to cook for an hour.

It would be a while before the main dish was done, so to tide over everyone’s appetite, they grilled up the bulbul meat and some vegetables in the meantime. Before long, both the children and adults started to drift towards the delicious aromas, and they eyed the banquet impatiently. It seemed none of them were skilled enough at hunting for real meat to be on the menu very often.

After sharing a peaceful meal, it was time for the group to be off.

“Here, take this,” Ijuin said. He handed one of the people a piece of paper. It was a map of the routes of Nayuta’s refugee-collection ships. Now that the elvish speakers finally had full control of the city following the local Defense Force’s fall from grace, the settlement was tentatively opening its doors to all who were interested in citizenship.

Just before they left, one of the women offered a few weary parting words.

“Please be careful in Fukuoka,” she said. “It’s a living hell.”

Apart from the sudden detour, the rest of the road to Fukuoka was smooth. They drove nonstop from then on and reached Fukuoka by three in

the afternoon. Their destination was the government office in the center, around the Tenjin area near Hakata ward.

Everything was quiet as Natsuki drove along the city street. But that in itself stuck out. The silence.

“Now this is just creepy,” said Natsuki.

“It’s worse than I thought,” Yu agreed.

The red-haired former high schooler slowed down. Fukuoka used to be a hub of activity, with vehicles crisscrossing the highways in uncountable numbers. But there was none of that to be seen anymore. Instead, the once-busy streets were populated with people—refugees—sitting around or lying right in the middle of the road. They were everywhere. Natsuki couldn’t go any faster than a crawl for fear of hitting someone.

They were passing through a district crammed with office buildings, but not one of them was without at least a few shattered windows. Groups of people loitered in front of the largest of them, though they certainly weren’t employees. Their worn and tattered clothes were only matched by the look within their eyes. No matter what these street dwellers were doing, whether that be lying about in the street, chatting among themselves, or sitting beside boiling pots and open fires, they all had that same defeated, shattered, and ultimately dead expression on their faces.

“God, this is no way to live,” Ijuin murmured. “I don’t see even a single shelter for people to sleep in. They’re just using abandoned buildings like a bunch o’ homeless people.”

“Some of those groups are just kids,” Yu pointed out.

“I hate to break it to you, but their parents are probably dead.” Natsuki wore an oddly stoic expression. “I’ve seen it a lot. No one left to look after them, so they take care of themselves.”

“Oh…”

In that sense, Yu supposed their own group wasn’t so different. He looked at the orphans’ eyes and saw pain. They were all gaunt and bony, and several carried iron pipes or random construction tools. Some looked no older than ten.

“It seems…” A subtle sigh escaped through Ein’s nose. “It seems a number of them have resorted to violence to get what they need.”

“Sharp as always,” Natsuki replied. Her words fed into the illusion that she was as unfazed as ever, but there was clear frustration in her tone. “Things might start looking up if they could get some foreign aid or at *least* some volunteers to help these people out, y’know? But until then, kids’ll keep going hungry, and they’ll keep doing whatever it takes to eat.”

“I don’t see many women,” Yu remarked.

“I’d sure hope not. Who’s gonna go takin’ a walk around a place like this? Who knows what’d happen to you?!” said Ijuin, voice rising gradually. “My family’s supposed to be here! How do I know if they’re okay in all this?!”

“The people from the village said they only distribute rations once a day, and it’s just a bit of wheat flour baked in water or scraps of plain suiton dumplings,” Yu recalled. “This place is... It’s something.”

He could feel anger churning inside him. He knew it was their enemy, the armies from the other side, that had reduced the world to what it now was, but even still. Seeing the seat of a so-called “government” in such a state filled him with unbridled emotion.

Before Yu’s rage at the spineless, detestable adults could boil over, Ein spoke up. “Natsuki, I take it you’ve already noticed what’s happening?”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied nonchalantly. “Our car’s getting us a bit of attention. We’ll be careful.”

They had made it to Hakata, and many pedestrians were throwing curious glances their way.

“It would appear not many travel by car in these parts,” Ein said. “In fact, it’s almost as if those that *do* are not thought well of.”

“Yeah, some of these guys don’t look too happy with us,” Yu said.

He was peering outside the window and scanning the area when he saw, to his surprise, another car approaching in the opposite lane. It was a luxurious black sedan, fit for someone of high status—more specifically, it resembled the kind of vehicle a governor or member of the Diet would travel in.

Suddenly, one of the bystanders hurled a rock at the black car.

“What the hell are you doing to us?!” he roared.

“Pull the bastard out!” another man shouted, stepping in front of the vehicle with a metal pipe in hand. “Lemme see his face!”

About a dozen other men trailed behind him. The sedan couldn’t pick up any speed for the same reason Natsuki couldn’t, leaving it vulnerable to the people’s fury as they beat on the car with pipes, tools, and stones. Yu could sense the depths of their hatred, the intensity of their pent-up anger.

The sedan’s driver was in hysterics, as was the man in the suit behind him who was shouting something to the rioters outside. Likely desperate calls for calm.

Natsuki stopped the car, and that was when Yu realized that he recognized the suited man.

“He was with the delegation that came to Tokushima. The only one who wasn’t wearing a military uniform,” he said. “I think they called him ‘Mister Ijuin.’”

“Wait, for real?!” croaked their Ijuin.

“Yeah. I completely forgot about him after all the chaos.”

“I mean, to be fair, Ijuin’s not *that* rare of a last name. It could be a coincidence for all we—oh my god, I know him!”

Yu jumped as his friend lurched forward. What a coincidence it was.

Natsuki put her hand on the door handle. “I was still mulling it over, but I guess I should probably go break things up,” she said. “Be right back!”

A short while later, the mob was gone. Natsuki had done a good job of running them off simply by snatching one of their metal pipes and bending it in half without even blinking. No one stuck around after seeing that.

Ijuin senior immediately burst out of the car, blubbering, “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much! I simply don’t have the words to express my gratitude!”

He reached for Natsuki’s hand, but the samurai girl dodged his grasp with a small step backwards.

“Sorry, I don’t shake hands with guys who don’t know how to keep them to themselves,” she said.

“Oh, I do! Really, I do! I don’t take just anyone’s hand, you—”

“Don’t act like you haven’t given out a billion handshakes to anyone you think you can kiss up to, Cuz,” Ijuin the younger interjected.

“Is that…” The man met eyes with the young boy and broke into a wide grin. “Takamaru! You’re alive! I thought I’d never see you again! What a blessed day it is!”

“Yeah, sure, I guess. I mean, I’m happy and all, but…” Ijuin looked at “Cuz” with a difficult expression. “What’re you doing with the provisional government? You worked out of Kanagawa, didn’t you?” He turned to his friends. “Er, anyway, right. Ichinose, this is my cousin and the second son to the head family, Haruki Ijuin. He inherited his dad’s constituents and campaign funds, and now he’s a third-generation dietman.”

“I had a feeling the Ijuins were something else,” Yu muttered. Now that it was all but confirmed, he was more content than surprised. Takamaru Ijuin was, in fact, kind of a big deal.

Former dietman Haruki fiddled with his hair awkwardly. “Well, the thing is, the government right now’s more of a… How do I put it? The Defense Force’s officers staged a coup, so it’s kind of a military junta now. But they still need suits to do the pencil pushing, and unfortunately I had the perfect job experience.”

“Uh-huh. Very unfortunate,” Ijuin said sarcastically. He squinted at his cousin. “From what I hear, the politicians get to live it up around here.”

“Listen, if someone weren’t there to be the voice of reason, the refugees would be getting *nothing* to eat and we’d have *twice* the number of casualties!” Haruki argued. “And I’m not here alone. I’ve got the whole family to think about, so I want to try and make things better.”

“Right, the family! How is everyone?! Are they safe?! What about my parents?!” Ijuin interrogated the man.

“They’re fine. I can’t say that about everyone, but they’re still around.”

Ijuin’s eyes lit up at the news. But just then, a siren started to go off, wailing from speakers around the entire city.

“I assume this means we have uninvited guests,” Ein said somberly.

3

Tenjin and Hakata formed the central heart of Fukuoka. Downtrodden refugees spilled out of buildings and onto the streets, transforming the once-bustling city into a cesspool of ennui and despair.

But life was returning to Kyushu's de facto capital. Only it was in the form of fear.

"They're back! The monsters are here!"

"Where the hell're they coming from?!"

Fires broke out all across the city. Convenience stores, houses, elementary schools, office buildings—everything started to burst into flames seemingly out of nowhere. The source, in truth, were small orbs of light that flickered to life in the sky and fluttered to the ground below. They were small enough to fit in one's palm, but the moment they touched something, it combusted suddenly and violently.

"It's gotta be an Anomaly casting spells!" Ijuin surmised.

Separating from his cousin only moments after reuniting, he and the others had run straight for the heart of the panic. Yu had already armorized and sent a surveillance droid to scan the Tenjin-Hakata area.

Ijuin saw what the droid was seeing through a pair of HMD goggles. "Hell," he groaned. "Not even the Asura Frame's picking up on what spell this is. I'm not even getting an Anomaly identification!"

"Perhaps it's concealing itself with magic," Ein supposed.

Yu nodded. "It's a likely possibility. I'll go by air and see if I can't pin it down."

"And I'll cover the ground," Natsuki said. "Before that, though... Ein, if ya please!"

"Understood," Ein confirmed. "Fight well!"

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.
—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.
—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

Ein recited the Gospel Code as beautifully as ever, and the Prayer Wheel at the end of the Mark VI Asura Frame polearm's shaft began to spin. Adaptive nanofactors spilled out of Vritra's generator, shaping into auxiliary droids in the form of floating, translucent snowflakes the size of tennis courts—MUV Snow Crystals equipped with freezing liquid helium artillery shells. By the combined power of science and magic, four flowery fractals of ice were created in total.

"Now, time to try out the new guy!" Natsuki cheered.

The next to be born of Natsuki's Green Dragon Crescent Blade was an aquatic flower of metal about the same size as the Snow Crystals, with forward-facing petals. MUV Water Lily—of these, four were manifested.

The eight droids scattered through the air across Hakata and Tenjin, firing on the blazing buildings—the Snow Crystals with hypothermic artillery and the Water Lilies with high-pressure water jets emitted from the

machine's petals. Normally, the latter would be powerful enough to cut through concrete, but for firefighting purposes, it was tuned down. Through their combined efforts, the fires quickly died one by one. And they achieved all this with the Asura Frame's own energy, shared completely wirelessly through advanced magnetic resonance technology courtesy of the migrant sages.

"They'll take care of the fires," Natsuki said. "Let's go, Three!"

"Roger," the Devicer replied. "I'll cover the air."

Right now, this was not Yu Ichinose, but Devicer Three, and the voice he used was the very same that Zhou Xueli had once called "fake" and "overly dramatic."

Taking to the sky, he found that the orbs of light were spawning in intervals of two to three minutes before beginning their descent down to the city. And they were elusive. One second a building was combusting over in the Tenjin area, and the next there were flames by Fukuoka Tower. Yu couldn't predict them, nor could he even begin to imagine what sort of Anomaly could have created them.

"Rudra, can you sense anything? Magic? An Anomaly?" Yu asked the Frame. "Anything at all?"

No response came. No windows of information, no directions, nothing. It was strange for his partner to be so quiet.

"Shroud!" Yu called next. "Help me search!"

Yu grabbed the scarf around his neck—the Holy Shroud bequeathed to him by Ein—tore a piece off, threw it into the sky, and the cloth separated into little fibers, filling the air like dust. If some magical entity was lurking nearby, Yu trusted the Shroud would find it.

Or at least, it *should* have.

"What? How?"

The Holy Shroud's threads drifted in the air—and nothing else. They soon vanished with the wind, the scarf self-regenerating its missing piece. It hadn't worked. Yu couldn't believe it, but then he had another idea.

"They're not hiding with magic," he murmured. "Rudra! Sound! I need you to pick up footsteps, heartbeats, even the faintest noise!"

A notification reported to Yu that the audio sensors were boosted to maximum sensitivity, and then the Mark III picked up something. The usually inaudible humming of some kind of machine. It sounded almost exactly like antigravity lifters, and adding to that suspicion, the source was even moving through the air.

Baffled, Yu activated his jet stream thrusters and shot towards the origin of the noise. He arrived in an instant, reached his hand out, and grabbed something out of the air. It felt hard and crunched like metal.

"What the heck is this?" Yu muttered.

In his grip was a cylindrical object resembling a cigar, except it was about the size of a metal baseball bat. It had been completely invisible until only a second ago.

Yu didn’t know what to make of it until the Frame displayed a window identifying the item.

“It’s…a MUV Hiding Tinder? It’s an auxiliary droid?!” Yu read the accompanying description. “‘Equipped with optical camouflage and specialized for stealth’?! ‘Used primarily for harassment operations and inciting panic by setting fire to enemy territory’… What Frame is this from?!”

He’d damaged the droid, which must have been why the camouflage had gone offline.

Just then, a commlink came in from Ein.

While Yu and Natsuki were still out searching for the source of the inferno, Ein and Ijuin remained back at Hakata Station to provide support.

“Hm?”

“Somethin’ up, Lady Ein?” Ijuin asked.

“That remains to be seen,” she replied. “The item around the neck of that boy approaching us simply caught my eye.”

Calmly pacing towards them was a young man who looked about the same age as Yu and Ijuin. The prominent and distinguished features on his face were particularly arresting. He was an attractive boy, to be sure, but the look in his eyes betrayed something else, and his hair was a strikingly pure white. The poncho concealing his spindly body was tattered and stained the color of ash. A red scarf was coiled around his neck.

“Devicer Three’s is yellow, but sorta looks the same, huh?” Ijuin said.

“As it should.” Ein’s expression became guarded. “It is a Holy Shroud.”

“Say what?! Then that dude’s a Devicer?!”

The white-haired boy stopped a few paces away.

“Well met, I hope. I do not recognize you, Devicer,” Ein greeted him politely. “Your demeanor tells me you don’t come bearing friendship, but I welcome you all the same.”

“Save your breath,” the boy spat. But a moment of thought later, he seemed to backpedal. “Actually, you and I are going to be seeing each other a lot now, so I guess I should tell you my name. It’s Leo. Makishima. And I’m here for *you*, Replicant. To put you to use where you belong.”

“That being?” Ein asked placidly.

“With the Mark VII. As my weapon.”

Leo raised his hand, and at the end of his withered and cracked index finger, a light shined. Ein and Ijuin instantly collapsed at a single glance. Their legs gave out beneath them, their bodies convulsing, hearts palpitating and pounding in their ears.

“Wh-What is this?!” Ijuin rasped.

“I suggest you don’t fight it,” said Leo. “The sooner you pass out the better, lazy pig. The Mark VII’s optical hypnosis is no joke, so the aftereffects can get nasty if you try to resist.”

“Don’t you…fat-shame me, you little…!”

Ijuin fell quiet before he could spit out the insult, his consciousness fading. Ein struggled to cling to hers, but in her last few moments of awareness, she managed to send a single commlink.

“Yu! Natsuki! The King of Flashfire—Agni’s Devicer has come to take me prisoner!”

4

Yu was at Hakata Station in a matter of seconds, soaring through the King of the Storm’s realm at blistering speeds. He found Ein and Ijuin on the ground, unmoving, and a small boy standing nearby.

He landed soundlessly and seamlessly between his friends and the stranger. The boy’s hair was white, his eyes wild, but he didn’t so much as flinch.

“There you are. The second Three,” the boy said. “Good.”

Yu glared at him through the helmet. “What’s ‘good’?”

“Your Replicant’s out cold. Right now, it’s just me, you, and our Asura Frames,” the young man responded. This must have been Devicer Seven, Yu deduced. “*That’s* what’s good. Now we can really see which of us is stronger.”

“Hm,” Yu grunted coldly. “Is that a challenge?”

“That’s right. I need to know why you were the one to get your hands on the elf and not me. If it’s because I’m weak, then I’ll get stronger. If it’s just luck, well... Then that’ll be that.”

“Don’t tell me *you* were the one who sent that droid out to attack the town.”

“Had to get you here somehow. This way you wouldn’t be able to turn me down,” the Devicer said. “If the government wasn’t run by worthless trash, maybe I wouldn’t have needed to make things ugly. Those idiots make me gag.”

“I can’t believe you,” Yu growled.

It seemed Devicer Seven and the provisional government were connected in some way. But regardless, the disaster wrought by his droid had burned countless buildings to ash and created no small number of casualties. Yu had seen them even from the sky, and that was to say nothing of what he’d done to Ijuin and Ein. They lay on the hard ground, clearly in pain, and Yu had no idea how to help them.

The rage he felt could not be exaggerated. And yet he did not let it choose his words.

“I am Devicer Three,” he declared. “And I protect the weak—anyone who can’t protect themselves. I will not fight a fellow Devicer of the Asura Frame.”

“*Ha*!” the white-haired boy laughed mockingly. “All right. Then all I’ve gotta do is prove that I, Leo Makishima, don’t need protecting! Because I’m stronger than you!”

Leo dramatically cast the hem of his poncho up, revealing not only the T-shirt and jeans beneath, but a very peculiar belt around his waist. On its buckle was—a Prayer Wheel.

“Let’s go, Agni!” he shouted. “We’ll knock Three off that high horse and show him what we can do!”

The Asura Frame Mark VII—Agni—was unique. That single belt was the entire device, and the Wheel of Orison in its buckle was beginning to pick up speed. A brilliant sheen enveloped Leo’s body as the antigravity lifters carried him about half a meter above the ground, where he hovered.

But then, Natsuki suddenly leaped out of nowhere, roaring and swinging the Green Dragon down onto the Mark VII as she did. The guandao’s heavy blade arced towards Leo’s head beneath the shimmering light, but it stopped there, blocked by the glowing force field around him.

“Three! Tough guy over here’s got the same defenses as Vritra!” she cried.

“The barrier you used against Quldald!”

“Smart!” Leo interjected. “But I bet your Mark VI can’t do *this*!”

A beam flashed from the force field, blasting the Mark III with a ray of heat. The black and gold nano-armor’s chestplate burned red. Yu groaned, thrust his hand out towards Leo, and fired a volley of calcium bullets, but the glowing shield was unaffected.

“You’ll have to try harder than that to crack the Photon-Frame!” Devicer Seven crowed.

The blanket of light surrounding him fired another heat ray, this time at Natsuki. The red-haired samurai girl saw it coming, though, and stabbed the Green Dragon into the ground, raising her own defensive barrier. It was dimmer and duller than Leo’s but still did not let the beam pass through to its master. In terms of impenetrability, the two were the same. But there was one major difference.

“I can’t move with this thing up!” Natsuki grumbled. “How come he gets to throw out attacks with his? That’s not fair!”

“In that case, looks like I’m up,” said Yu.

Gritting his teeth against Rudra’s still burning chestplate, Yu darted towards Leo through the air and delivered a fierce kick to the Photon-Frame protecting him. The force field went flying, with the Devicer still inside.

Leo stopped some several meters away, swearing as he did, but the boy himself was untouched.

“Agni!” the Devicer called, the savage look in his eyes intact. “They’re next!”

Flames roared from his right hand and drowned the black and gold Frame in a sea of fire. He very much intended to turn Devicer Three’s body into a singed corpse. The attack was deceptively magical, but in truth it was a weapon derived from nanotech—though the nature of the scorching torrent was irrelevant to Yu as he sweltered inside the Mark III. A data screen measured the interior temperature at sixty degrees Celsius and the exterior at eight hundred degrees, and those numbers were climbing.

Yu shot up, diffusing the torrent along the way with a powerful burst of the jet stream thrusters.

“You’re not getting away!” Leo growled, quickly giving chase.

The Photon-Frame targeted Yu’s back with an incessant barrage of heat rays, but nimbly ducking, weaving, and spinning around them was no problem for the King of the Storm in his domain.

“Natsuki! Can you take care of Ein and Ijuin?” Yu asked over commlink.

“I got ’em!”

Yu nodded and returned his focus to the enemy. He shot back towards Leo, using the force of both of their momentums to land an explosive punch to the Mark VII’s Photon-Frame.

“Keep it together, Agni! More power to the thrusters!” Leo ordered. He defied the force of the blow and continued to push forward against it at full power. This time, he wasn’t going anywhere. “Now! Electromagnetic heat waves!”

The Photon-Frame began to emit high-powered electromagnetic waves, the heat from which could fry anyone within its vicinity. Right now, that happened to be his attacker: Yu and the Mark III.

“Crap!” Yu sprung back a great distance. “It’s not magic, so it’s not being nullified. If this keeps up, Rudra’s not going to make it out in one piece.”

His partner displayed a status screen indicating where the Frame was most damaged. Some of the joint areas were already marked in yellow. Yu himself was fine and Rudra certainly still had plenty of fight left in it, but it would be risky to let this drag out.

“That Photon-Frame doesn’t seem like it has any weaknesses. It has both offense *and* defense,” he murmured. “But if that were the case, then every Frame in the Asura Series would’ve been equipped with it.” The Mark VII used the Photon-Frame to cover for the fact that it had no physical armor. In other words, there was something exploitable that it was protecting. “He’s playing greedy, so all I have to do is work out a game plan to counter it. Help me out, Rudra.”

Whether it was ironclad and assertive ball control, slow buildup plays, or any of the other endless kinds of strategies available on the soccer field, Yu had never subscribed to any one tactic. What was most important was adaptability and being able to choose the correct play for the situation.

The Prayer Wheel picked up speed in response to Yu’s plea. With every turn, electricity and mana grew, and the Mark III’s power surged. As it did, Yu zipped in a lateral arc around the back of the Photon-Frame faster than Leo could react.

“Cheeky little…!”

“Rudra!” Yu shouted. “Electromagnetic heat radiator!”

He thrust out his hand, upon which a MUV Crow Gauntlet was already attached, having discreetly created it midflight. The weaponized gauntlet’s long, sharp talons clawed into Leo’s force field as electromagnetic waves radiated from Yu’s palm, superheating his target with the Mark III’s own energy.

“Agni! Spin your wheel!” Leo barked. “Increase power to the Photon-Frame!”

“Perfect,” Yu muttered. His sudden surprise attack had forced Leo to prioritize defense, thus shifting his previously invincible balance. Yu funneled as much energy as he possibly could to the heat radiator’s output.

Leo growled, realizing his mistake too late. “So that’s your game!”

“I’m dying to know how you’ll get out of this one,” said Yu.

The Mark VII had no plating or protection for typical hand-to-hand combat. It was doubtful he would be able to pull off any of the same stunts the Mark III had, much less throw it off.

Leo's surprised expression told the whole story. But the fire returned to him in mere moments. "Read the Gospel Code, Agni!"

The Wheel of Orison at his waist turned as the voices sang the song of awakening: "Gate! Gate! Paragate! Gate! Gate! Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate! Gate! Paragate!"

A deluge of particles flowed out of the Photon-Frame, and the nanofactors combined to form a giant, shining forearm. From fist to elbow, it easily surpassed twenty meters in length.

"Crush this bastard!" Leo roared.

"Using auxiliary droids to account for limitations," Yu murmured. "Smart thinking."

Yu had only just evaded the soaring giant's fist of light when Natsuki came in over the commlink. "*I-I don't know how to tell you this, Three, but Ein and Ijuin aren't looking good!*"

"What?"

"They're having some kind of seizure, and they won't stop sweating! I don't know what's happening!"

A video feed appeared in Yu's visor. Ijuin was laying on the ground, twitching and moaning as if suffering from a horrible nightmare. Ein, too, was racked with small tremors all over her body. The girl's usually bright and confident face had been turned into a horribly pained grimace. Yu had never seen her this way before.

He shot Leo a glare that could kill. "What did you do to my friends?!"

"Optical hypnosis," Leo replied flatly. "One of the Mark VII's weapons. Anyone who looks at it falls into a coma and starts to hallucinate. Like they're stuck in a particularly nasty bad dream." He shrugged. "The worst cases have seizures, and when they wake up, they're never the same again."

"You can't be serious."

"If your friends are among the unlucky ones, they'll need medical attention. They'll be fine with proper care." The boy was strangely calm. His ferocity and passion in the heat of battle was gone without a trace. Yu eyed him sharply. "But the only place they'll get it in Fukuoka is with the military. By the time you get back to your floating city, it'll probably be too late."

"What are you saying?" Yu demanded.

"That I'll put in a good word for you. So long as you surrender," said Leo. His eyes were keen. Filled with cunning. "I don't need the Replicant to be lucid. As long as it can recite Gospel Codes, I don't care if it's comatose. But I think you might feel differently."

Yu wanted to scream. He had no choice.

5

There was a particularly expensive hotel located in Hakata Ward, just off the Naka River and conveniently close to the Nakasu entertainment quarter. Once upon a time, it had been constantly packed with tourists and white collars on business trips. Currently, though, it served as the seat of leadership. Some months ago, the interim government of Japan had seized the building under eminent domain, and Yu recalled hearing that the administration's chairman was also effectively the commander-in-chief of the military. So there was also some talk about utterly trivial nonsense, like designating the position with a brand new rank and title.

They talk about how this is all temporary until Japan recovers, but I'll believe it when I see it, Yu thought.

He had more pressing matters than politics right now, anyway. Primarily the fact that he was under house arrest in one of the hotel's vacant rooms. Granted, he could have left whenever he wanted—no one could stop him, after all—but Ein and Ijuin had been taken hostage. So he was pretty much stuck.

As for Natsuki, Leo hadn't cared enough to bother with her. He'd shooed her away and told her in no uncertain terms to simply "get lost." The boy was likely smart enough to know he couldn't keep *two* Devicers tied down at once.

"How long will I be here?" Yu asked. The voice changer was still on, as was the entire Frame, two whole hours after the battle with Leo. The Mark III remained plated over his body.

The Frame could support its Devicer's vital functions for up to a week of prolonged armorization, sustaining water and nutritional balance as well as body temperature, and even disposing of human waste. One could even sleep inside the armor. Yu had agreed to Leo's terms on the condition that he wouldn't have to remove the Mark III, and the boy had accepted.

Yu now found himself and the weapon of mass destruction sitting in a hotel room, supervised by a singular woman.

"Well," the girl replied with difficulty, "they're thinking about court-martialing you." Kiriko Kaji had a distinct Kansai accent, and she seemed young for an officer. In her early twenties, maybe. "Some people wanna charge you with desertion and rebellion against 'the lawful succession of the Japanese government and military,' or...something. That's just what I heard."

"Do they?" Yu said, more sarcastically than as a real question. "They must have me mistaken for my predecessor."

"B-But we can't really know that unless you show us your face!" the female officer stammered.

She was clearly intimidated by Devicer Three's presence, but Yu didn't want to scare the girl. Careful this time to speak with less hostility, he asked, "I'm guessing you heard that from Devicer Seven?"

“Er! Uh, how’d you figure that out?”

“Had a feeling. He seems the type to plan for everything.”

Cunning was a good word to use to describe him. He was sharp. That was Yu’s impression of the boy called Leo Makishima.

“*Tell* me about it!” Officer Kaji exclaimed, leaning forward out of sheer exasperation. “That guy’s *always* mouthing off, and oh my god, he’s got *no* filter either. He’s drier than a desert and constantly arguing, I swear. If there’s a way he can twist your words to make his own life easier, he’ll find it. *Seriously*, I don’t think I’ve *ever* met a kid as bratty as him! I mean, I’m his superior officer! Don’t I deserve *some* respect?”

Yu had evidently touched a nerve. He hadn’t expected her to go off like that, but it made asking the next question easier.

“How’d a guy like that become the Mark VII’s Devicer? And you—you’re augmented, right?”

His current prison was, unfortunately, inaccessible via commlink. Yu had tried to connect to his friends several times to no avail, and the cause was his watchdog: Officer Kaji. Earlier, nanofactors had flowed out of the palm of her right hand, scattering across the walls, ceiling, and floor of the room. They were keeping Yu from contacting the outside world. The only explanation was that Kaji was nano-augmented, and this was her manifestation—the ability to jam nano-communication methods within a fixed space.

Yu had never met someone with such a unique nano-ability before. On the plus side, though, she was rather talkative. He tried to use the chance to dig up some intel, but he ended up getting a whole lot more.

“Do not get me *started*!” she snapped as if Yu had stepped on a landmine. “So me and Leo were in the same group of kids that got rounded up at this one nano-tech facility in Kansai, and around the same time, the elves there’d just gotten their hands on the Mark VII—they were supposed to do some tune-ups then send it over to Taiwan. But *right* then, all of Kansai got hit with this *huge* earthquake and everywhere started flooding.”

Suddenly, Yu understood. Leo and Kaji’s story was the same as his. As Ijuin’s. As Aliya’s.

“There were Anomalies and portal-keeps,” she went on, “and things were just crazy. Leo stole the Frame in the chaos, put it on, and—”

“And he used it better than anyone,” Yu interrupted.

“Right. Yeah. So anyway, the Defense Force recruited us before they retreated west, and now we’re here.”

The story was the same, right until the end. They had chosen the opposite path, the one leading to Fukuoka, while Yu’s had taken them to Nayuta.

He sighed. These weren’t the people he should have been fighting. But here they were, squabbling over a Replicant—over Ein—while the archmages were still out there.

“Where…are we? Where is…”

Ein grimaced. She awoke in a bed and was immediately assaulted by a splitting headache. For a second, it felt as if someone had driven a nail through her skull, but the feeling dissipated a moment later.

She glanced around the room, still lying down and not daring to test if she was well enough to sit up again. It was bleak, wherever it was, and it seemed to be a hangar of some kind. She could see military cars and mini trucks occupying the space, and then she noticed that what she lay on wasn’t a bed meant for sleeping. It was a stretcher for transporting patients. She deduced she must have been being moved somewhere.

The final thing she noticed was the young boy with eyes like daggers.

“You’re up,” he said plainly.

“Where is Ijuin, boy called Leo?” Ein asked arduously.

“Relax. Left him at the hospital. I’m not after him.”

“And the Devicers? Of the Mark III and VI?”

Leo ignored her. He knew discretion. It was clear to Ein that he was intelligent and shrewd beyond his years, but she could tell this wasn’t the wiliness of wisdom or rationality. It was younger, and it came with all the folly that youth did.

“Leo,” she said, “I’m afraid to tell you that you and I are not meant for one another. We are incompatible. I cannot bestow either the Holy Shroud or the Gospel Code to you as a comrade must.”

Leo grunted.

“Taking me prisoner will gain you nothing,” Ein stated.

“Sure it will,” said Leo. “All I need is the upgrade for my Asura Frame. Your opinion, your ideals, and even your body don’t matter to me.”

He glanced at a truck parked nearby. Ein recognized the thing in the trailer bed.

It was a sleeper pod. The very same device Ein had slumbered within at Maizuru, floating for so long in a bath of vital fluid. Only in battle did her awareness flicker dimly awake inside it, just enough to allow her to transmit the Gospel Code to the first Devicer Three. To the soldiers who fought the Anomaly invasion in eastern Russia across the Sea of Japan.

“What I need isn’t an elf with a god complex.” A shadow loomed behind Leo’s eyes. “It’s a tool.”

Chapter 4: Starcaller

1

Aliya Todo had spent the last several weeks in Al'iksir single-mindedly attempting to awaken the sleeping Mark VIII Asura Frame, Soma. She was having little success.

"How many times do I have to send this stupid awakening signal?!" Aliya clutched her head and groaned. "That's it! It's not happening! I'm done for the day!"

"A valiant effort was made."

Aliya was being comforted by a new friend she had made—an Indonesian girl named Shanti Maretta Putri. She was cute and short, though her limbs looked too long for her torso, and her slim figure evidenced her chronic inability to sit still. She wore a pale blue tank top and black jogger pants.

Next to the Jakartan high schooler was a Replicant girl.

"Good job."

Her name was Klan, and her skin was a reddish-brown shade. She was a woman of very few words, but Aliya liked her, and Shanti too.

The three girls were fifty-two stories up Central Tower, in a testing room. A single work table in the center was the only thing occupying the comically large space. Everything was stored in one of the walls, and all one needed to do to retrieve something was utter the voice command. Upon doing so, robot arms would bring the item straight to you. On the opposite end, a glass pane offered a wide view of the ocean to the south.

The Mark VIII rested on the work table, its silver form lustrous and somewhat feminine. Aliya sourly stretched her right hand over the black-accented body, and a ring of light glowed in her palm, her nanofactors activating. She transmitted the awakening signal, but Soma did not stir.

"I've done this *hundreds* of times, and if I have to do it *one more*, I swear…" Aliya grumbled. "Nope! I'm taking the day off!"

"I think we should," Shanti agreed. "We'll go get some coffee at the cafeteria. C'mon, Klan."

The Replicant nodded and followed the Jakartan girl out of the lab. Shanti always knew how to brighten a room, and she was extremely caring and considerate to boot. She had received her nano-augmentations a few days after Aliya's arrival, and ever since, she'd been coming to the floating city every day by boat. Klan had practically imprinted on the girl.

"She's definitely no Ein," Aliya murmured. "Seems like the elf queens come in all sorts."

The decision to throw responsibility to the wind was an incredibly liberating one. She stretched long and hard, then pulled out a folding table and some chairs. Before long, Shanti and Klan had returned with coffee and snacks.

And so the stage was set for teatime chatter.

“Oh, you like idols?”

“Yeah!” Shanti said. “I used to listen to a lot of Japanese ones, but my current obsession is this K-pop group called UNIONZ. The one Taeyang’s in.”

“Right, Korea’s Devicer Four,” Aliya replied.

The two of them dominated the discussion, but Klan seemed to be enjoying herself just fine. She leaned forward attentively, nibbling on cookies and pieces of chocolate. Her figure was, for lack of a better word, much more “adult” than Aliya’s or Shanti’s, but her face and mannerisms had an air of innocence and simplicity.

“I loved music,” the half-elf girl said. “I know how to work a DAW *and* how to play piano.”

Shanti’s eyes lit up. “No way! Were you trying to go pro or something?”

Aliya hummed for a while, thinking. “I don’t know if it was that serious. Mom used to tell me I probably wouldn’t like being a sage, so she pushed me to try less academic things.”

“She would’ve been one of the migrants, yeah?”

“Yeah. One of her friends told me I had an ear for music once, so I started learning. I had to stop around middle school to help with her research, though. I’m a little out of practice.”

Aliya was gifted with perfect pitch, as a matter of fact. She knew several classical pieces on the piano and was familiar with a variety of DAW software that she’d fiddled with in the past. Which was to say she was definitely more knowledgeable than the average person.

Shanti looked at the elf girl. “Klan’s good with music too. She sings a song every evening when the sun sets. What was it called again?”

“The Traveler’s Hymn,” Klan replied quietly.

“Oh, I know that one. Ein sings it a lot,” Aliya remarked.

“All this music talk’s making me wanna break out into song! Hey, guys, why don’t we head to Jakarta and find a place to…” Shanti trailed off. “Oh, right. Everywhere’s still closed because of the attack.”

“Well, that just makes me want to sing even more.” Aliya thought for a moment. If Al’iksir was generally the same as Nayuta…

She raised her right hand and a nanomachine interface popped up out of thin air—a hologram. She quickly found a music app.

“There!” Aliya exclaimed excitedly. “A comprehensive archive of the entire world’s musical works, all in one music player! We can do some karaoke with this for sure!”

A robot arm extended from the wall, producing three microphones. No one could stop them now. Come what may, there would be karaoke.

Shanti chose an upbeat K-pop song to start things off. Aliya followed it with a hit from one of Japan’s top female idol groups. Klan politely declined her turn and simply watched the two sing a pop duet for the third song.

When the chorus ended, the elf girl pointed at something. A data screen had appeared out of nowhere, displaying the Mark VIII's status. The bar graph depicting Soma's power output had never budged before, not even once—until now. Now, it was floating just above zero.

Aliya stopped singing and her eyes darted towards the Frame. Ever so slowly, the Prayer Wheel in its waist was turning. She exchanged glances with Shanti who seemed to have noticed as well, and they nodded, beaming.

"Aliya. Maybe your voice, your singing…"

"Maybe it has the power to awaken Asura Frames," Aliya concluded for Shanti. "I've never heard of that kind of ability before, but my friend Natsuki's manifested in her physical strength. I think it's possible!"

It was time to get back to testing, but now Aliya wasn't burdened with debilitating burnout.

Two hours of trial and error later, they finally had a working theory. It was time to test it now. Klan sat in front of a long string instrument known as a koto while Aliya stood next to her.

"Good luck, you two!" Shanti cheered.

At her call, the Replicant princess began to pluck the koto, slow and calm. Aliya waited for the enchanting melody to continue for a while, and then, together with Klan, she sang the Traveler's Hymn.

"O Traveler! Heed me, O Traveler! Wanderer of the realm and distances vast. Rejoice, O Siddha! The awakening has begun!"

Klan's voice was smooth and perfect, and although Aliya's performance was less powerful, it was every bit as beautiful. Her rhythm was steady, unfaltering, easily grasped with her musical acuity. The half-elf and the clone repeated the chorus several times before the wheel in the Mark VIII's buckle began to turn. The Wheel of Orison, otherwise known as the Prayer Wheel, spun slowly at first but gradually gained speed until it hummed with the motion.

Soma had awoken.

It happened in an instant. The only reaction Shanti had time for was a quick and confused, "Um, okay?!" The silver Asura disintegrated into millions of particles of light, and suddenly, they were surging towards the Jakartan high schooler.

And then, standing before them was the armorized form of Devicer Eight. The silver and black nano-armor, slender yet curved like a woman's body, was like no other in all of the Asura series. A purple scarf was wound ceremoniously around her neck.

"Shanti. You have been chosen," Klan said. Already she'd spoken more in a single sentence than she usually did in a whole day. "Soma and I have decided. The world is in your hands."

In response, the silver and black warrior groaned. Long and dramatic. “We’re still doing this? Okay, I guess we’re still doing this.”

2

This was technically Yu’s *second* time imprisoned. This first had been in Quldald’s castle with Ein, and now he was under house arrest in an old hotel. The difference, though, was that his own people and Devicer Seven were his captors this time.

“There goes the twenty-four hour mark,” he murmured. The clock had just passed three in the afternoon. Yu had spent an entire day armorized.

The window of his room on the twelfth floor provided a wide view of the clear June sky. According to the Mark III’s sensors, he wasn’t being listened to or watched, but this was still “enemy” territory.

Yu made full use of the Frame’s life support systems, and he hadn’t once left the chair he sat in nor touched the food Officer Kaji had brought for him.

“She’s my only visitor, I guess.” Not that he wanted to talk with the military, but it was telling. “Could be that most people here don’t want anything to do with me. My guards outside definitely haven’t seemed very motivated.”

A few soldiers were stationed in the hallway. The Mark III picked up on their whisperings.

“So what’re we supposed to do if the new Three stops playing along?”

“Pray they don’t level the whole building.”

“What’re we supposed to do with these pea shooters? Shoot the dude? Yeah, right. Top brass is outta their minds.”

“It’s not actually them, I hear. It’s *him* again.”

“Friggin’ figures. The Mark VII can’t be that strapped for options, can it? Kid’s gonna take over the whole military if we let him.”

They had to be talking about Devicer Seven. Leo Makishima. This whole thing was probably his idea, to keep Yu in one spot.

“And I still don’t know if Ein or Ijuin are okay,” he muttered. “I hate this.”

Leo’s whole objective was Ein, the Replicant. Yu had no idea where she was or what they were doing to his partner, and he couldn’t stand it. He was sick of losing the people he cared about.

Suddenly, the sound of static made him perk up.

“...ose! Ichinose!”

It was a commlink. And the voice was Ijuin’s. But how? Nano-communication had been completely jammed since yesterday.

“If you’re getting this, say something!” Ijuin pleaded. “Listen, you won’t get through like normal. I’m holding this connection through Avalo. I couldn’t reach you with the usual commlink, so I’m trying satellite communication!”

“Like before!” Yu was amazed. Ijuin had said he wasn’t confident he could get it to work again. And it even bypassed Kaji’s jamming.

“Natsuki busted me out of the hospital after they treated me,” he continued. “But Ein’s still missing. We’re looking as hard as we can, but I was running out of options, so I tried accessing Avalo again. And then I found the Mark III’s coordinates! And I found out I could reach you through the satellite!”

“Rudra, patch me in,” Yu instructed. “That’s amazing, Ijuin! I’ve got the gist of the situation, but I’m stuck here while they have Ein hostage.”

“*Figured*,” Ijuin replied a few seconds later. There seemed to be some lag communicating via Avalo, but the fact that they were communicating at all was huge. “*Don’t worry. We’ll find Lady Ein! I’ll let you know as soon as we’ve got her, so hang in there!*”

“I’m counting on you, Ijuin.”

A little bit after cutting the commlink with his friend, Yu had a thought.

“I wonder what kind of intel Rudra and I can get from Avalo.”

Perhaps he could find something on Ein’s whereabouts. The man-made Asura acquiesced to Yu’s request, and a window appeared displaying text in English.

`[Connecting to AVALO Satellite]`

“Rudra, can we get anything on Ein’s coordinates?”

The Mark III did not respond. There was no progress bar nor even an error message. This was strange. Yu always took the artificial god of destruction’s onboard intelligence as a rather courteous entity. It would normally give *some* form of response or another.

Worry and anxiety swelled in Yu’s chest once more. “She could be unconscious. Maybe the link is possible, but she’s just not able to respond,” he reasoned. “That’d keep us from confirming her location…I guess.”

Whatever his purposes, Leo clearly needed a Replicant. He needed Ein, so he surely wouldn’t hurt her...

No. Ein was a proud woman. She would never surrender or go quietly, especially not to that haughty Devicer. What if he resorted to violence in order to make her submit?

“Ein…”

Yu was suddenly faced with the harsh reality that he might really, truly lose her. That they might never see each other again.

Just like he could never see his family again.

His home in Kita ward had been lost in an instant. With the people he loved. Flooded. Drowned. Along with countless others. The water elementals had stolen so many lives during Kanto’s destruction and the typhoons had toppled buildings. And somewhere among the rubble were the corpses of Yu’s family.

Their bodies hadn’t been found, but all he’d heard from them was deafening silence. Yu had quickly given up on seeing any familiar faces when the survivors evacuated west.

His chest hurt. He’d lost a part of himself that day. A part he could never get back. A year had passed since then, but the first six months had been the hardest. There were times when he’d think of them, and the tears would come, but he couldn’t let them fall. He couldn’t vent his pain through words either, because he wasn’t the only one who’d lost something.

And now it was happening again.

“Where are you, Ein?!” he cried out to the sky. “Tell us!”

And in his desperation, his voice and all its emotion became a commlink, a message that traveled all the way to Avalo.

Several seconds later, a reply came.

“Yu... I am here...”

The voice was weak. It didn’t sound like her. But it was. Avalo had carried Ein’s voice to Yu. His friend. His partner. The one he’d scarcely been apart from for even a second ever since they’d met.

And then, Yu saw a vision. Not from his own mind, but from Ein’s. Her memories. It was a facility of some kind, and it had to be where she was being kept hostage. They could narrow down their search area now. They could find her.

“Thank you, Rudra,” Yu said to his other partner. “You *were* trying to connect us.”

Part of it, too, felt as though his overflowing emotions had been the final push. It was silly to think feelings could affect machines, but somehow it felt right.

He had to let Ijuin know.

But just then, a high-pitched beep sounded in Yu’s ears. He had told the Frame to alert him to any approaching enemies, even if he were asleep. Was it a soldier? Had Leo finally returned?

Yu prepared himself for anything. Anything except for the young man suddenly standing in his room.

“Hello again, warrior of black and gold!”

Quldald of the Whirlwind flashed a brilliant grin.

3

Ohori Park was located right on the water. The pond had once been a moat for Fukuoka Castle, and the wide area and plentiful nature made it a favorite spot for families and couples. After the Evacuation, though, the place was all but deserted. All that remained of the old park was a sad and desolate vacant lot.

The Nayuta group was gathered at the nearby remains of what used to be a popular neighborhood café. Making use of the long-neglected tables and chairs to create a makeshift base of operations, Natsuki Hatano,

Speaker Nadal, and the two executive officers, Shiba and Sakuma, were holding a meeting. Along with...

"So," Takamaru Ijuin said to the lone outsider, "you *really* don't know where Ein is?"

"I tried looking, but I couldn't find anything. What did you expect? I handle general affairs. I don't exactly have much authority with them," former representative Haruki Ijuin grumbled. "If they find out I was even here, they'll have me gunned down. The government these days doesn't mess around!"

Nadal nodded. "I told you, did I not? What you call a 'government' is little more than a violent guerrilla force that's seized control of the city, much like what you'd see in developing nations. Luckily for you, dietman, we consider you not *entirely* worthless."

"Oh, Speaker, it's an honor to hear you say that!" Haruki blubbered without missing a beat. Incidentally, this behavior of his towards Nadal only began once he'd heard his position in Nayuta.

It was largely ineffective, however.

"Before you get too excited by such glowing praise, know that I only give it because you're merely the foam on the surface of the festering party you belong to," Nadal clarified. "Were you a more established career politician like your father, you would surround yourself with spineless yes-men who refuse to challenge your own beliefs, thus dooming yourself to spiral into the quagmire of anti-intellectualism. Ultimately, your sorry life would end with a whimper, forgotten by those who placated you and scorned by those you segregated when they refused to."

"O-Oh."

"Ah, but lest we forget that scion of the former prime minister and very sexy Minister of the Environment. The former Minister of Defense who failed to differentiate work from browsing social media too. Both of them were indeed model politicians in their first year in office. I would learn from their examples, if I were you. The censorship of dissenting opinions is the first step on the path to idiocy."

"W-Well, the matter of the minister and his...unique description of the climate crisis aside," Haruki stuttered awkwardly, "I believe it's well within a politician's duties to use the internet to inform the people."

"Then the information must be distributed equally," Nadal countered. "Frankly, though, I find blocking those offering entirely valid criticism utterly childish. It tells me they don't belong in power."

"W-Well, then..." Nadal's long-winded rant had flabbergasted Haruki. His eyes darted around awkwardly.

Shiba smiled tiredly. "Leave it to a genius to remember every little detail and statement made by every politician from every party in the last thirty years."

“Now if he’d just work on that attitude,” Sakuma added. Not too long ago, he never would have imagined speaking out against a superior so brazenly.

“Anyway!” Natsuki interjected. Her peony furisode fluttered as she gave Haruki a firm whap on the back. “Give it another go, eh? You want Nadal to remember what a good job you did with that big brain of his, don’t you? He’s already thinking about putting you up in Nayuta.”

“O-Oh, no!” Haruki denied. “I’m doing this for my little cousin, of course!”

“I’m sure that’s part of it, but I know how you are, Cuz,” Ijuin said.

“Everyone,” Nadal interrupted. He waited for the room to quiet down. “I have an idea. And you might just be our silver bullet.”

Natsuki recoiled. “Me?!”

Some time later, Kiriko Kaji was walking through Tenjin in uniform, when she turned the corner and bumped into someone she recognized.

“Natsuki?! Oh my gosh, what’re you doing here?!”

“Oh, nothin’ much.” Natsuki grabbed her shoulder. “Got a minute?”

She then practically picked the girl off the ground and lugged her into the electric van they’d brought from Nayuta. Had the judicial system still existed, Natsuki could have probably expected a few criminal charges.

Shiba sat in the driver seat with Sakuma sitting shotgun.

“Never thought I’d see the day I kidnap a comrade in arms,” the latter lamented.

“Wait, am I being kidnapped?!” Kaji shouted. “What’s going on here, Natsuki?! And where did you go after Kansai flooded?! I was so worried about you!”

“I just kinda wandered a bit, you know.” The kabukimono girl smiled awkwardly. “I’m hanging out with the elves these days, and my friend Devicer Three. They had a bit of a favor to ask me, since I was at west Japan’s nanotech facility. Said I’d probably find some familiar faces in Fukuoka, so I went looking for ’em.”

“It’s a good thing you knew where the Fukuoka lab was,” Shiba remarked.

The building Kaji had emerged from was likely the government’s own nanotech laboratory. Shiba started the van and quickly left the scene.

Natsuki smiled impishly. “What can I say? We got sent around a lot, back in our lab rat days. Yu and the others too, I bet.”

Kaji rested her face in her hand wearily. “So that’s how you found our base.”

“Yup. Shiba and my pal Ijuin worked a few stealth droids around the area and took pictures of the people coming and going. Then I just checked to see if I knew anyone.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on! What do you need *me* so badly for?!”

“C’mon, you should know that,” Natsuki said. “We want to know where Ein is. Why do you think I chose the chattiest person I could find?” This time, however, Kaji went quiet, frowning. “Hey, we’ll settle for the tough guy if you know where he is. Devicer Seven, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Kaji said reluctantly. “I don’t know where he is *or* where he hid the Replicant. He’s a crafty, selfish brat. He barely manages to keep his own team informed on a need-to-know basis.”

“Fair enough. Something’s been bugging me, though,” murmured Natsuki. “He was at the nanotech facility too, wasn’t he? I don’t remember him at all. Which is weird, ’cause the kid definitely stands out.”

“He was...quieter when you were still around.” Kaji sighed. “Never made any friends. Never talked to anyone. After Kansai fell apart, though, he took off with the Mark VII. And ever since, he’s been in his own little world.”

“Well, either way.” Natsuki grinned at her. “With you here, we got ourselves some leverage for a hostage exchange!”

“You’re crazy if you think Leo’d agree to that!”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got some brains on our side too. We’ll get Tough Guy out in the open one way or another.”

Natsuki waved off Kaji’s protests with a devil-may-care look on her face, until a commlink from Ijuin wiped it away.

“H-Hey, do you got a minute? ’Cause Avalo just sent me a warning message, and something bad’s headed straight for Fukuoka.”

“What? Heading from where?” Natsuki asked calmly. Be it from air, sea, or land, she was ready for anything.

Well, *almost* anything.

“From space!”

“From what now?”

Before Yu stood an archmage of the other side—the beautiful and handsome Quldald of the Whirlwind. The Mark III displayed a window next to his form.

“Illusion magic,” Yu murmured. “What, I only get a projection this time?”

“For now, my esteemed enemy,” Quldald responded proudly. “The moment of truth is not yet nigh. Today, I come to you with news of a new opponent that I hope will tide over the ennui until our final battle.”

“I think I’ll manage on my own,” Yu shot back. “What are you up to this time?”

“This.”

A staff-like thing appeared in his hand, but not the one he typically carried. It was small, about half a meter long, and made of metal. Yu recognized it.

The archmage had called it “Starcaller.”

“That meteor summoner again!”

“Indeed!” Quldald exclaimed. “But this time we shan’t settle! I will call a shower of stars to rain down upon this earth!” The mage declared this

boisterously, almost theatrically. “I was busy conducting rituals these past several days, you see. Offering my prayers to this wand. ‘Breaking it in,’ so to speak. Prepare, champion, for the stars will come tonight. Perhaps even before the sun sets!”

“What have you done?” Yu growled. “Are you trying to destroy the entire city?!”

“Oh, no! Perish the thought! It would be horribly rude of me to challenge the heroes of Earth with one measly dungpile at stake. What I plan to do is annihilate half of this entire island!”

In other words, he was targeting all of northern Kyushu. The staggering power this man wielded and the irreverent grandeur with which he did it made Yu feel sick to his stomach.

Quldald’s ghost grinned the entire time, even as it started to vanish.

“Until we meet again, warrior of black and gold! Send my regards to the warrior with the dragon’s blade!”

With that, he left Yu to tremble in the empty hotel room. An alert message appeared in his visor.

“It’s from Avalo,” he muttered. “Meteor cluster confirmed heading towards Earth. Estimated atmospheric entry at…sixteen hundred hours?!”

The projected impact zone was, as promised, all of northern Kyushu. Yu took a long, deep breath from the pit of his stomach. It was currently 1526.

He didn’t even have an hour.

4

Leo Makishima was born and raised in Sasebo, Nagasaki. These days, he kept his hair bleached stark white, but it used to be bright brown, courtesy of his American father. A man his mother had never actually been married to.

He considered his mother the witless type. Too childish for her own good. Too stupid to realize that the charming foreign soldier boy had been using her, that she’d be abandoned the moment his deployment was up, left to give birth and raise a child alone.

Leo was the only thing he had bothered to leave behind.

It wasn’t a particularly unique or uncommon story for Japanese military towns with American bases. In fact, it was probably one of the tamer ones. At the very least, he wasn’t a product of sexual assault. Leo didn’t have much to say about his childhood. No real pent-up emotions he cared to vent. If he ever met his father, he probably would have stabbed the life out of him, but that was it, really.

His mother had apparently gone through hell to raise him. She’d been on her own, disowned by her own parents, and left to fend for herself. All Leo remembered, though, was being hungry. He was intimately familiar with that feeling. Snacks and cup ramen had been all he subsisted on, and even now, he still had trouble keeping down meat and vegetables. Because of

that, his body was small and emaciated, his bones far too thin for a fourteen-year-old, a consequence of his malnourished youth.

Still, he did appreciate his mother for trying, for what it was worth. Maybe she shouldn't have spent all those nights out partying, drinking, and coming home to scream curses at her own child in a drunken stupor, and maybe she shouldn't have told him she wished he'd never been born, and maybe Leo wouldn't lose any sleep if he never saw her again—but he did appreciate the effort.

He had left home about a year ago, when he was ordered by the government to transfer to west Japan's nanotech research facility. There, he received his nanomachines, and although he considered the blatant human experimentation less than subtle, he had been glad to be out of his house.

And then, in June of last year, the entire Tokyo Metropolitan Area was destroyed. Flooded and turned to rubble by magically induced earthquakes.

September of last year, however, was when everything changed for Leo.

This time, the floods and rain and earthquakes hit Kansai, and the region met with the same fate as Kanto. Leo had been at the facility in Kyoto's Nishikyo ward at the time and avoided much of the disaster. And he remembered the sheer thrill he had felt.

"Finally! Finally this shitty country's over! It's every man for himself now, and the power to crush every enemy in my path will be mine!"

He had a plan. He'd felt it during the nanomachine experiments. Its call.

The elves had received the Asura Frame to conduct maintenance on it—a single belt with a peculiar buckle, and yet it was a weapon of mass destruction. Every time Leo would see it, biding restlessly from afar, he would hear its voice. Beckoning him.

Fight with me, it would say. Fight. Fight. Fight.

Leo knew the Asura of Flashfire had chosen him, and in the midst of the chaos and destruction, he had stolen away with it.

With that first armorization, he had become Devicer Seven.

Ein felt a strange sort of nostalgic comfort. But it was a comfort she had no intention of indulging in.

Once more she found herself floating in a pod of vital fluid, drifting between wakefulness and sleep. She was naked, like she had been at Maizuru. But little time had actually passed, so her slumber was light, and in the moments of awareness between those of listlessness she occupied her mind with thoughts.

I must contact Yu, she told herself wearily.

Ein recalled what little scenery she had seen while Leo and his men transported her. They had seemingly taken her to an airport, the very same one she and the others had used on their trip to Jakarta. These facilities seemed rather rare, so she believed it would be a vital clue to her whereabouts.

Yu... I am here... Where are you? Natsuki. Ijuin...

How she wished she could reach them by commlink, but it was impossible. Her nanomachines had been restricted, and their only capability now was communicating with Avalo for the purposes of transmitting Gospel Codes. Leo had configured the sleeper pod so. The functionality was originally meant for the purpose of reducing the strain on any Replicants inside, but in this case it only hindered her.

Were things different... Perhaps Leo's cunning shrewdness could have seen him develop into a proud warrior. But any hope for the future, he had snuffed out himself and replaced with darkness. Ein grieved for him.

My mind...is failing...

She had to get in contact with Yu somehow. She had to. Yet there was only so much she could do in her current state.

And then she heard a voice.

"Where are you, Ein?! Tell us!"

Yu...

At last. Avalo had brought them together. Ein heard the pained cries of the one she loved, and it stirred her heart.

Yu... I am here...! I am here! Come to me!

The elvish princess put the last of her strength into a single message before she succumbed to the call of slumber. And so she drifted yet again.

Leo clicked his tongue in frustration. He lingered on the top floor of the JCAB administration building. It was a small room meant for air control, and it had glass windows in every direction. This was where he had absconded to with the Replicant. The princess slept behind him, her every vital function cared for by the pod, and he was joined by a group of tight-lipped technicians and young soldiers who only cared to take orders from the strong. Most of the older military flunkies didn't seem to take kindly to the fourteen-year-old Devicer, so he hardly trusted them enough to inform them of this location.

And *especially* not Kiriko Kaji. That girl liked to talk too much.

The control tower was also already conveniently stocked with radar and communication equipment. It was the perfect place for Gospel Code transmission. There was just one thing left to do.

"Now to get rid of Three and that red-haired woman, and then it's mine for good," Leo growled.

He remembered the girl with the guandao Asura Frame. She was impossible to forget, after all. She'd thrived at the nanotech lab as the constant center of attention *and* displayed the highest manifestation levels faster than anyone. She was bright, cheerful, had a million friends...

Leo clicked his tongue again. He hated girls like her. Viscerally. He had made a point to keep as much distance from her as possible back in his lab days. So it was no wonder the girl hadn't recognized him.

"Just pisses me off to see her again. Now of all times," he spat.

But the red-haired girl wasn't the only thing that had lit his fuse. It was that cheeky Devicer Three and his mouthy Replicant. Before falling asleep, Her Royal Highness had made sure to say her piece.

"Leo Makishima, the path you walk leads to darkness, and it pains me to see you make such mistakes."

"You have so much potential. You could be so much greater than you are. A hero in your own right."

"I only pray that there comes a day when we might call you an ally."

The elf woman had said all of this, staring at Leo the entire time with those pitying, self-righteous eyes. She had not cried. She had not cursed him.

After that, Leo had quickly put her out with his optical hypnosis.

"Mind your own business. All I want—all I *need* is power." He spat at the pod. "I'll show you darkness."

If only she were awake. Then he would have done more than spit.

5

Dozens of meteors were currently hurtling towards Fukuoka and the surrounding region. According to Avalo, they were bits of debris that had broken off from a near-Earth asteroid. It'd been revolving around the sun

for several days, but now that their orbit had overlapped with Earth's, they had become full-fledged meteors. The gravity of the planet's surface pulled them closer.

But this deadly yet highly unlikely astronomical phenomenon was only made reality by the hand of an archmage—Quldald of the Whirlwind—and a certain mystical item.

To combat this threat, the Nayuta group was currently gathered at the base of Hakata Port Tower—a one-hundred-meter-tall construct supported by red steel beams, very reminiscent of Tokyo Tower. It had, in fact, been created by the same architect, and it was a decorative staple of the port itself.

"I-I did what you said," Kaji reported to Nadal. "I asked everyone I know by commlink to help us with your anti-meteor shower strategy or whatever. Apparently the government said they'd cooperate!"

"As expected," the sage replied placidly. "They lack any sort of air or antiair capabilities, not that it would do any good against a barrage of what essentially amounts to extraterrestrial artillery. I imagine they would grovel in the mud if it meant us granting them the help of both of our Asura Frames."

"And Scary Eyes?" Natsuki asked. "Think we'll get a third Frame for the plan?"

"That...has yet to be seen," Kaji said awkwardly. "I'm about to get in contact with him myself. No one in the government or military's going to be able to get him to do anything." She sighed. "I'm pretty much his caretaker at this point."

"Ohhh, Tough Guy's soft on you, eh?" Natsuki teased. "I'm impressed. That kid looks like he'd bite your hand off if you got too close."

Kaji smiled stiffly. "I wouldn't say he's 'soft' on me. There's just a trick to him that I've figured out."

"Wow, look at you. The Queen of the Mixers is coming out of retirement!"

"Literally how do you even remember that?" Kaji waved her hand, and a gray window appeared in the air. "Anyway, I'll give it a shot."

Her bodily nanomachines activated, functioning much like the wearable, motion-controlled computers the elves often wore on their wrists.

"Leo," she called out to the blank hologram. "Leo! It's an emergency! Pick up!"

"*What?*" the boy snapped, his less-than-pleased face appearing in the window. The commlink had connected.

"Don't 'what' me. You see the data I sent you, right? That satellite thing says there's a bunch of meteors heading straight for us! It'll destroy Fukuoka and all of—"

"I saw it. That means there's an archmage somewhere throwing magic around." Leo grinned ferociously. "I'm about to go crush them. Nice job, Kiriko. Your reports aren't typically this useful."

“Okay, *time out*!” Kaji shouted. She pulled up a data window and started glancing to the side to read from it. “The, uh, something satellite estimates a total of…seventy-two extraterrestrial bodies. To, er, break the atmosphere at about…sixteen hundred hours. Sizes ranging from fifteen to twenty meters across.” She returned her attention to Leo and looked him in the eyes. “So you and the Mark VII should go way up into the stratosphere to burn up the meteors before they get here! Like, you know, a forward in soccer or basketball! You’ve gotta get them all before they break through!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Meteors usually all, uh, evaporate? Vaporize? Whatever, they burn up in the atmosphere, so if you speed up the process with the Mark VII, everything should work out! Right? It’s all up to you!”

“You know, Kiriko,” Leo said coldly, “this seems way too logical to be a plan you came up with. Who’s the mastermind? I know it can’t be one of those idiots from the government.”

“Wow, rude! I can strategize and stuff!” Kaji vehemently insisted, her eyes swimming. Natsuki, Shiba, Sakuma, and Ijuin were staring holes into the true instigator. Nadal, however, only listened intently with his trademark stoic expression.

“It’s the people from Nayuta, isn’t it? This sounds like something that old elf would come up with.”

“God, fine, you caught me.” Kaji’s demeanor suddenly shifted. Her stern expression and firm tone softened, stark professionalism transforming into the gentle attitude an older sister might take with her feisty younger brother. “Listen, we’ve got a bit of a truce going on. Not that any of this is *my* fault, of course. That’s all you.”

“Whatever. It made me stronger.”

“Then how about you use some of that strength for us? I know you’re not interested in protecting anyone, but if you’re going out there to fight anyway, why not let it be this? You could save our lives, we’d owe you a few favors, and you’d get to show off.” Silence came. “Pretty good deal for everyone, right? I know you’re itching to get out there and try out your new power. Don’t act like you’re not. And you know how hard it’s going to be to sniff out an archmage that doesn’t want to be found.”

Leo grimaced and clicked his tongue. “*Fine. I’ll play along.*”

“Thank you! And just one more eensy little thing, if that’s okay? Could you maybe possibly let the Replicant lady go so she can help out the Nayuta folks?”

“Screw off. The Replicant’s mine.”

The commlink was then promptly cut.

Kaji groaned before facing the others and putting her hands together in apology. “I’m sorry, Natsuki! I really tried, for real, but I couldn’t get your friend back!”

“It’s cool, really!” Natsuki grinned. “Felt like I was watching a lion tamer.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it that,” said Kaji, smiling shyly. “You just have to be reasonable and totally upfront with him. And whatever you do, don’t push his buttons.”

“That easy?”

“Pretty much. I swear he has his moments. Sometimes I even think, hey, maybe he’s got a tiny bit of good in there. *Sometimes*.”

“Sounds to me like our little tough guy’s got a thing for you,” Natsuki teased.

“Yeah, right.” Kaji laughed.

As the two girls chattered and joked with each other, the youngest of them was completely silent. Ijuin didn’t want to interrupt, but more importantly, he had been tied up in a satellite call with his best friend, corresponding via text this time so as not to disturb Kaji’s negotiations.

“Actually, I think we’re A-OK,” he said, finishing up his last message. “Ein’s comin’ home! Ich— Three’s got it covered!”

6

Leo stood on a runway of the Fukuoka airport. The Mark VII—Agni’s Photon-Frame—glistened around his body as he activated the anti-gravity lifters, rocketing straight up into the sky.

“Replicant. Gospel,” he commanded.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.
—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.
—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

At long last, it was here. The elf’s beautiful voice rang out, though it was flat and emotionless. It was far more a mechanical process than a song, but it was enough for Leo.

“Yes!”

The Prayer Wheel in his belt spun, quickly reaching peak velocity, and it chorused with innumerable voices, “Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!”

A blanket of adaptive nanofactors diffused out from the Photon-Frame, sparkling and coalescing into a physical form reminiscent of the glowing arm he had used to repel the Mark III. However, this time, it was more than just that. A second arm, two legs, a head, and a torso all came together to give birth to a colossal puppet—a giant of light well surpassing forty meters in height. Where two eyes would be were gaping voids, and from its back sprouted two angelic wings. In place of a heart was Leo himself.

This was Agni’s most powerful of auxiliary droids, a creation Leo had only been able to construct a single limb of until now. Truly, Leo could feel the massive difference in power he could generate with the Replicant’s hymns.

“Time to put it to the test, Agni! Let’s see how many of those things we can shoot out of the sky!” he roared. “Replicant, upload as many Gospel Codes as you can! I want it all! The Doomsday Books, the droids! Unleash everything!”

Meanwhile, Yu lingered by the window of his hotel room, still fully armorized. He was not enjoying the view, however. He was examining a video being streamed to him by a MUV Bumblebee surveillance droid he had deployed.

A winged giant of light was shooting up into the sky. It was apparently a droid. With the help of a Replicant, Leo had finally obtained the ultimate power he’d so craved.

And that was Yu’s cue.

Some time earlier, his conversation with Ijuin had gone thusly…

“Ijuin! I’ve got Ein’s location! Can you go get her?!”

“Uh, things are a little chaotic!”

“I know. The meteor storm. But once Ein is safe, I can help!”

“Wait, you might not need us. I think you’re good to head there yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seems like Devicer Seven’s gonna be heading out to take on the meteors. That’ll be your chance.”

Ijuin’s prediction had come true, and Leo Makishima had deployed high into the atmosphere to stop the incoming stellar bombardment. Nothing was in Yu’s way anymore.

Yu silently thanked his friend. Without his help from the satellite, Yu would have been utterly immobilized. But not anymore.

“I’m coming, Ein.”

Donned in the black and gold armor, Yu crashed through the window and shattered the sound barrier in an instant. His destination: Fukuoka Airport.

Chapter 5: Falling Stars

1

They had first met at the tower in Maizuru. A public facility converted into a military installation for transmitting Gospel Codes.

Yu knew exactly where to look.

Surveying the airport from above, he spotted several iron constructs on top of a building near the runways. Radio towers, perhaps. At the very highest floor of the building, he spotted a room surrounded by glass like some sort of observation deck. That had to be it.

He and the Mark III burst into the room, scattering shards of glass everywhere. She was there. Sleeping exposed in that horrible pod again.

“Ein!”

Yu ran to her at once and placed his armored hand against the sleeper pod’s outer casing. Initializing the ultrasonic oscillator at its lowest setting, the exterior quickly gave way. It and, surprisingly, the rest of the device cracked, crumbled, and fell apart. The liquid inside gushed out onto the floor, and Yu caught Ein in his arms.

“You came for me,” she rasped. “Yu…”

“I had to! I…I won’t lose any more family!” Yu cried. “When I thought I might lose you, I… It felt so empty. And I don’t really know or understand what we are to each other or anything, but…” Yu was a child. Matters of love, relationships, it was all beyond him. “But what I do know—what I learned today is I don’t ever want to lose you. You’re my partner. My family. And I’d do anything for you. Anything to keep you by my side!”

Ein giggled weakly. “Shall I put that down as your wedding vow?”

“Wait, is that how it came off?!”

He’d only spoken his mind. Yu had somehow not even remotely considered that it could be construed in a romantic way.

Ein’s voice was still weak and feeble, but she was clearly regaining some of her old confidence and wit. She nuzzled her face against the Mark III’s chest. Their embrace was a tender one, as if between two lovers.

“I suppose I’ll count my blessings, given the circumstances,” she breathed suggestively. “Thank you, Yu. For rescuing me. And for your words.”

“I’m just glad to have you back. But there’s no time.”

“I know. I surmised most of the situation between bouts of sleep, and it seems things are dire.”

At last, they separated. They looked into each other’s eyes and nodded resolutely. The real battle was just beginning.

Yu tore off a piece of the Holy Shroud around his neck, and the mystical cloth swelled to the size of a blanket. He draped it around the princess’s naked body and steeled his mind as Devicer Three once more.

“I need to go,” he said, standing and turning around. “Natsuki’s waiting for you too.”

“Right. I will assist you and the Asuras as well as I can!”

With Ein’s voice at his back, Yu took off through the shattered window. The sun was beginning to set, and the current time read 1548.

“Hurry, Rudra!”

Yu shot for the stratosphere, together with his second and equally trusted companion.

Natsuki pumped her fist in the air. “Nice! Three pulled through!”

The second she got the commlink from Yu, she made sure to let Kaji know.

“Awesome! Now Leo won’t be the only one out there!”

“Yup, and me and my Asura Frame can go all out!”

“I still can’t believe you’re actually a Devicer.”

The girls plus Ijuin and Executive Shiba had stayed behind while the others left for the airport. They were on a bit of reclaimed land, an artificial island built on the northeast side of Hakata Bay, called Island City. It had been the subject of major redevelopment projects spawning numerous businesses and high-rise condos, but it was abandoned after the Evacuation.

Natsuki and the others had set up camp in a wide vacant lot on the island’s edge. It had probably been the site of a construction project before, but it was just a pile of unoccupied dirt now, far from the city’s urban center.

“I hope the speaker’s made it to Ein safely,” Shiba said anxiously.

“I’m sure he has,” Ijuin replied. The overwhelming certainty in his statement betrayed the truth of his doubt. “I’d be worried if it was just Nadal, but he’s got Sakuma with him. Right?”

The brilliant sage might have had a mind for plots, but he most certainly was not the knight in shining armor he may have thought himself when he’d decided to go to the lone princess’s aid. And his terminal lack of any sense of direction didn’t bode well for him arriving in any sort of timely manner.

The others had decided to come out here to try and keep the fighting as far away from the people as possible. As noted by Ijuin to Shiba some time earlier…

“The archmages are definitely wising up to the Asura Frames, don’tcha think? They could try to come after us. Or Natsuki, more specifically.”

“I definitely wouldn’t rule out the possibility of an Anomaly ambush.”

Natsuki had agreed. “I can handle myself well enough, but I dunno if I could while surrounded by refugees.”

And so they had relocated to the deserted island by means of an armored car provided by Officer Kaji. It was outfitted with the old JSDF’s Network Electronic Warfare System, though Shiba was the only non-augmented person who would have found use in such outdated technology. For what good it would be with Asura Frames, anyway.

“All right, think that’s our cue, Vritra!” Natsuki said. Armed with a masterfully crafted guandao—the Asura Frame Mark VI—Natsuki thrust the blade into the air and transmitted her voice via commlink. “Let’s do it, Ein!”

“*At once!*” she replied. Although she sounded weaker than normal, her voice still carried all its regal weight. It was more than worthy of reciting the Gospel Code.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.
—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.
—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

The Prayer Wheel at the Green Dragon Crescent Blade’s ferrule whirred. With every turn, the turbine could produce energy enough to power an entire city. Or perhaps a swarm of adaptive nanofactors.

The sparkling cloud drifted up to the sky, a swirling galaxy of countless stars directly above their heads.

Kaji looked up at the beauty in awe. “I’ve never seen so many of them in one place before! No wonder Leo wanted one of those elves!”

“We’re just getting started!” Natsuki declared.

Indeed, the particles were beginning to converge. Together, they formed an auxiliary droid of incredible scale unlike anything anyone present had ever seen before. It was a massive serpent, its longer than two-hundred-meter body coiling as it rose into the sky.

“Kinda looks like a giant floating saucer,” Ijuin remarked. “The way it wraps itself up into a circle.”

“I think we’re witnessing the Dragon King himself,” Shiba muttered. “All of the Mark VI’s firepower—the entire glass cannon Asura’s offensive capabilities condensed into a single entity. It’s not so much a droid as it is a manifestation of the Frame itself.”

“Don’t let me down now!” Natsuki cheered to the serpent. “Turn that star shower into a star drizzle!”

She thrust the Green Dragon into the air, its tip pointing high into the heavens. At once, the enormous, coiled snake shot upwards.

MUV Avatar: Vritra. The beast was truly befitting of the Mark VI’s own name. Animated by antigravity lifters and powered by the Prayer Wheel itself via magnetic resonance, Natsuki commanded the god-given form completely. For the true Asura of dragons was in her very hands.

“Tough Guy’s already up there, so between the two of them, those meteors should be no problem,” Natsuki said cheerfully. “At least that’s what the boss said. We’ve got this!”

If only she had known what was to come.

2

The Photon-Frame surrounding Leo’s body had grown far beyond its usual size, transfigured into a great giant of light. MUV Avatar: Agni

manifested the protective field as an all-powerful puppet with offensive capabilities to match its defense, standing over forty meters tall and with wings adorning its vast back.

It continued its ascent through the atmosphere. At thirty kilometers above sea level, it stopped.

“Some view,” Leo mused.

Even he wasn’t immune to the majesty stretching out before him. An abstract painting of contrasting ocean blues and cloudy whites extended infinitely from below, curving into the distance. The Earth’s roundness was strikingly distinct from here. Reaching the ozone layer had taken mere minutes. The Asura Frame put even humanity’s fastest fighter jets to shame.

The Mark VII’s sensors went off. The first wave of the seventy-two meteors were now eighty kilometers from the surface, and their altitudes were dropping fast—fifteen kilometers per second, to be precise, or Mach 44—though they were slowing down.

This was far from a good thing, however.

“The faster they go, the more friction they generate with the air, causing the meteor to break apart,” Leo murmured, reading a data window being projected before him. “So that’s the problem, huh?”

In lieu of any physical monitors or armor, the Mark VII instead had to rely on projections like this to relay information. The Frame had analyzed and extracted the plan data transmitted by Kiriko Kaji earlier. According to the projection, most meteors burned up in the atmosphere due to the air density, and the majority that made it to the surface were no larger than pebbles. But to prevent that from happening, these had been magically decelerated.

“They’re pumping the brakes so they make it to Earth intact. The bigger they are, the bigger splash they’ll make on impact. Damn archmages think of everything!” But that just made them all the more enticing to beat. “Agni! Photon lasers!”

Leo commanded the giant from its heart. The avatar then raised its colossal, glowing arms and crossed them over its chest, firing a beam of light from where they intersected. It was the very same attack Leo often shot from his fingertips, but this was of far greater scale and designed specifically for non-atmospheric combat. The laser raced upwards ever higher.

Technically, space was defined as being at or over an altitude of roughly one hundred kilometers. Leo hovered at thirty kilometers, and his target was descending from about eighty, at an acute angle relative to the surface. The meteor was eighteen meters in diameter. Huge, to be sure. But within the expected range. Still, if allowed to complete its orbit at the Earth’s crust, it would cause an enormous explosion and leave a crater magnitudes larger than itself. The shock waves would travel for over a hundred kilometers in all directions.

That fate could be yet averted, however, as the red-hot mass of rock continued on its collision course. Leo's photon laser struck home and accelerated the meteor's heating to tens of thousands of degrees Celsius, until the surface began to crumble away. That was enough to do the trick. According to a computerized simulation displayed by the Mark VII, it would continue to be scorched on its way down and be completely vaporized long before ever reaching Kyushu.

"How long until the next shot's ready?" Leo asked the Frame. "Five seconds? Spin the Wheel faster, Agni!" The Asura of Flashfire needed to recharge in order to fire again, but he didn't have that kind of time. "Increase power! We need the lag time between shots as low as it can get!"

The Wheel of Orison in his belt sang, "Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!"

Leo locked on to the next target, trying his best to ignore the distracting racket. Calling it a meteor shower was a misnomer. It was hardly as concentrated as the name implied, and there was a considerable amount of space between each asteroid. Plus they came in sporadic bursts—sometimes in groups, sometimes alone. It was more like a light summer rain than a downpour.

"This'd be way easier if I could just melt them all at once!"

He prepared the second blast. The light giant crossed its arms again, and another searing ray burst from where they met. A direct hit. The meteor began to crumble.

Leo was less than impressed. "This is going nowhere!" he growled. "How am I supposed to take out every last one like this?!"

Leo knew very well that he was…a lot. He was not unaware of his own fiery nature, and he wanted desperately to simply give in to it and annihilate everything at once with a Doomsday Book. It would have needed a massive amount of electricity and mana to fire off, but if it was between that and waiting for the Prayer Wheel to charge over and over, he much preferred the flashy option.

Kiriko's voice replayed in his mind.

"If you're going out there to fight anyway, why not let it be this?"

"You could save our lives, we'd owe you a few favors, and you'd get to show off."

Leo clicked his tongue. The pleasure of seeing all of his targets destroyed before him in one fell swoop was difficult to resist, but the plan didn't allow even a single one to slip through. Meaning the logical course of action was to be patient and precise.

He huffed. Leo Makishima was certainly nothing if not fiery. But he would be dead in the ground before he stooped to brazen idiocy like those pompous adults.

"Hurry it up, Agni!" he barked. "We don't have all day!"

The Wheel of Orison sang, its chorus reaching a crescendo, and the Mark VII called upon more power than ever before. The radiant giant at last

began to fire laser after laser with almost no delay. A ceaseless barrage of photon rays singed the second wave, then the third, each shot striking home. Soon, he had fried fifteen meteors in total, a third of which were already falling to pieces and quickly turning to ash in the atmosphere.

But there were still over fifty on the way. Would this be enough?

Right when Leo's frustration was about to flare again, the Mark VII projected a video feed. It revealed something entirely new entering the fray, as well as its name and specifications.

"What?"

Leo was no longer the only one floating there in the stratosphere. It was a giant, silver serpent coiled into a circle, but the window stated that its unwrapped length was over two hundred meters. Its name was MUV Avatar: Vritra.

It was the Mark VI's droid. That red-haired girl.

The way it was coiled together made it look like a flying saucer, and the smoothness with which the anti-gravity lifters carried it only added to the illusion.

Lasers fired from all over the saucer's surface, much like Agni's photon lasers, but the dragon Asura had eight bores from which to fire. All of them discharged heat rays into the heavens at once. Each blast hit its mark as the meteors broke sixty kilometers in altitude.

"That much power can only mean one thing," Leo murmured. He clicked his tongue again. "The Nayuta snobs stole the elf back." Only a Replicant could create something of such strength, something that rivaled even his light giant. "Fine. We'll cross that bridge later. Right now, all that matters is winning. No matter what!"

That was Leo's reason for being. Expand his arsenal, learn from experience, and win. It was all he lived for. He found pleasure in nothing else. He cared for nothing else. So if he wanted to keep living, he needed to be stronger. Stronger than anyone.

And right when his resolve was steeled, it came. Something like a voice whispering deep in his ear.

Unleash the darkness, champion of Earth. It was a stately man's voice. But whose? Why did it sound so familiar? Surrender yourself to the thrill of battle. You know who your opponent ought to be, do you not? Come now, you know who among us can give you what you seek.

"You're…right."

The temptation crept into Leo's heart. When he closed his eyes, he saw a handsome young man dressed in blue. An archmage. He recognized him.

Now is the time. At last, I release the fetters of the curse of divine fury. Go, and fight. Fight! Fight!

He remembered now. His name was Quldald of the Whirlwind, and not long ago, he had defeated Leo. Rather than kill him, however, the archmage had marked him with a spell.

"Agni!" Leo roared. "Aim for the snake! It'll make a good target!"

A photon laser beamed from the giant's crossed arms, this time aiming for MUV Avatar: Vritra. The attack landed right in the middle of its winding body, and the serpent was split violently in two.

Leo cackled maniacally. "How do you like that?!"

But the serpent quickly reassembled itself, and the satisfaction immediately vanished from his face. It was a simple matter for a construct of nanomachines.

"Agni, don't let up— Whoa!" The reconstructed avatar immediately fired back at Agni, taking Leo by surprise. But the giant was just as impenetrable as the Photon-Frame, and both it and the boy in its heart were unscathed. Leo countered the attack with an equally fierce grin. "Not bad, Red Hair! You're not giving me the chance to keep the pressure on, are you?"

She had superb combat awareness. Any ordinary human fighter wouldn't have had the decisiveness to counterattack so swiftly. Leo applauded her quick thinking. It was probably the first positive emotion he'd ever felt for the girl.

"Don't stop now! Let's heat things up! Make this worth my time!" Leo screamed.

Before he could order another attack, though, the Mark VII detected an incoming threat. A third party was shooting up into the stratosphere at a blistering speed, its distinct black and gold armor unmistakable. It was the Mark III, and from what he could tell by the auxiliary droids expanding its limbs and stature, it was primed in Full-Armor mode.

"Yeah, that's right," he snarled. "Come right at me!"

Now this was an opponent worth fighting. Leo swelled with pure excitement.

3

"He turned on us?!" Yu's voice reached them via satellite link. "I mean, it's not like he was ever with us, but I really wasn't expecting him to be throwing potshots at Natsuki's droid right at the eleventh hour!"

"I know," said Ein. "It doesn't seem like him."

She was still at the top of the control tower. Speaker Nadal and Executive Sakuma stood nearby, having rushed to the clone princess's side. Meanwhile, high in the atmosphere, things weren't quite going to plan. Leo Makishima, Devicer Seven, had fired upon Natsuki's MUV Avatar: Vritra.

"That boy is too clever to choose now of all times to play the fool," she continued. "I thought that we might have finally had his cooperation, but there's nothing for it now."

The two-hundred-meter-long droid of the Dragon King had transmitted video and data on the situation. Leo had indeed elected to ignore the encroaching meteors in order to fire photon lasers at his own ally.

"I'll go stop him!"

“It’s up to you, Three!” Natsuki chimed in from the reclaimed land by the coast. “I’ll work Vritra’s twin and burn up every last one of those rocks from down here!”

They didn’t have time for this. She was supposed to work with the Mark VII, and it was unclear if she’d be able to handle the task alone.

Ein pulled the Holy Shroud tight around herself as she looked up at the sky. Where her partner was currently soaring ever higher.

The plan had been for Yu to take the rear, stay on standby at an altitude of about ten kilometers, and destroy any meteors that happened to make it through. Leo had gone and tossed all that out the window, though. So on his way up, Yu equipped three types of droids to the Mark III. To his arms, MUV Crow Gauntlets with razor sharp talons. To his legs, a pair of long, metal casings outfitted with guns and rocket launchers—MUV Launcher Boots. On his torso, two upside-down V-shaped armor plates that fixed together around his chest and back, creating wings like a jet plane—MUV Wing Cloak.

Yu faced Leo for the second time, armed to the teeth in Full-Armor form. The white-haired Devicer was indistinguishable within the enormous, glowing avatar of Agni he inhabited. Although this made his snarl imperceptible, his voice came clearly over the commlink that instantly connected the two Devicers.

“There you are, Three!” he shouted. “Here to show me a good time?!”

“Is that what this is to you?!” Yu shot back, incredulous.

“You heard me. I want an opponent worth my time! And right now, you and the redhead are looking like my best bets!”

“That’s it?! That’s why you ruined our plan?! You can’t be serious!”

“Oh, I’m serious,” Leo growled. “I’m more serious than I’ve EVER BEEN!” The light giant crossed its arms and emitted a superheating ray of photons. Yu dodged out of the way by shooting upwards. “I’m going to beat you. I’m going to win and be stronger than ever before!”

A volley of photon lasers followed, cutting Yu and the Mark III off anywhere they tried to run.

He’s predicting my every move!

Was that even possible? Yu knew that the Devicer’s mind and the Asura’s onboard intelligence melded during armorization, and that this allowed for superhuman reaction times. Otherwise, combat at supersonic speeds would have been physically impossible. But that wasn’t the same as precognition.

No, this had to be all Leo. He was reading Yu’s movements through sheer instinct and aiming with split-second timing. Credit where it was due, the boy had a natural talent.

“Rudra!” Yu cried. “Counterattack!”

Full-Armor mode offered the Mark III a remarkably expanded arsenal, and around the calf area of its legs were eight barrels from which

supersonic guided missiles would fire. Each responded at once to Yu's command, launching sixteen rockets in total that raced towards the giant from every angle.

They struck true, but Leo's frenzied laughter cut through the explosions. "You'll need more than that to crack the Photon-Frame!"

"So it's not just bigger," Yu mumbled to himself. "It's stronger too."

The giant spread its lustrous wings. Its very body was the force field itself, and it was even tougher than last time. Leo might as well have been locked inside an impregnable fortress. One crammed with cannons of every size at every embrasure. The Mark III weaved around one such new attack as the colossus of light emitted electromagnetic heat waves from its empty eye sockets. Invisible and deadly, it could incinerate anything with a single glance.

Yu zigzagged out of range of the heat waves. But Leo immediately followed with a photon laser, and it would have landed had Yu not been intentionally moving erratically. The kid really was a prodigious marksman, and he had a fiery passion to match his skill. If only it weren't the uncontrolled blaze that it was. His hunger for victory was downright malevolent, his emotions unpredictable, his temper explosive.

Professional soccer saw a few players like that. Being a pro meant being at the top, having peak fitness. Add that to an insatiable craving for being number one and you had a downright demon on the field, aggressive to a terrifying degree.

The question was, what could you do against such a monster? Yu Ichinose was not the type to slam an unstoppable force against an immovable object and expect a solution.

"We're not going to win at his game, so we need to play a different one. New strategy, Rudra!" Yu cried.

The perfect tactic for one play wouldn't apply to a different one. Yu's style was knowing when to change to fit the current state of the game. Adaptability.

The Prayer Wheel whirred and the black and gold Asura Frame accelerated. Lasers, heat waves, and all manner of nanomachine missiles assailed him from all sides in an attempt to slow him down, but Yu swerved through it like he was dodging droplets of rain. The King of the Storm moved as the wind itself, and like the lightning that coursed through his clouds, he flew right up to the enemy.

Yu hovered in front of the giant's chest. In its heart skulked Leo Makishima.

"Now we fight on my terms!" Yu shouted.

Leo scoffed. "Go ahead and try! Your attacks can't break Agni!"

"Don't need them to!"

Yu touched both of his palms to the avatar's chest, but nothing more. And then, he switched on the ultrasonic oscillator. Next, the incapacitative paralytic sound propagator activated directionally. Sound waves penetrated

the otherwise unyielding fortress and vibrated throughout the giant's body, into the Devicer's own.

Leo's shriek shook Yu's eardrums. The white-haired Devicer struggled to endure the assault, and for a moment, Yu thought that was it. But only for a moment.

"Agni!" Leo barked. The pain in his voice vanished like it had been an illusion. "Enhance mobility!"

The forty-meter leviathan suddenly shrank, all the way down to a tenth of its original size, until its stature only slightly dwarfed the Full-Armored Mark III.

"No physical form," Yu murmured thoughtfully. "It can control its size."

"I've gotta hand it to you, Three! I haven't felt this alive in ages!"

The winged being darted behind Yu with the speed and fluidity of a comet streaking through the blackness of space. Yu then reacted by rolling behind Leo, as quick as a gale. And so a battle of aerial superiority began between light and wind, a supersonic dogfight, each competing for the advantage behind or above the other.

The Mark VII bolted straight and true like a flash of lightning.

The Mark III flitted and danced like the nimble breeze.

In terms of speed and agility, they were evenly matched.

"Looks like I'll have to pull out all the stops, just for you!" Leo howled. "Agni! Start the Doomsday Book!"

"Ready ours, Rudra! Ein, the Gospel Code!"

At his request, her dulcet voice resounded in Yu's ears.

—The mortal knows not what he does. The mortal knows not of the flames of hell.

—The mortal knows not of good and evil, nor of the atrocities he commits.

—The mortal is bound by illusory chains of proud ideology, and wherefore might he be freed.

Ein's voice, carried through Avalo, reached him all the way from the control tower on Earth, and it was filled with emotion, hope, and love for Yu. But it was soon followed by the exact same yet entirely different voice.

"What?!" blurted Yu.

It came from within the Mark VII's titanic incarnation. It was Ein. Except this recital was robotic, completely devoid of any feeling.

—The trailokya knows no peace.

—The wanderers of the world ail, suffer, and return to ash.

—And the flame of righteousness is ever kindled.

"Yu, he must have compelled me to upload this Gospel in my sleep!" Ein exclaimed.

“He’s good at keeping backups, then,” muttered Yu.

The two Doomsday Books promptly clashed. Sparks and electricity arced off of the Mark III’s armor as the Mark VII started to burn and luminesce. The King of the Storm became one with lightning itself, bolts smiting the enemy one after the other, and the King of Flashfire transformed into a scorching star, condensing into pure, unbridled heat. Enough to potentially melt his opponent’s nano-armor and subsequently boil it into gas.

Again, they were evenly matched. At first.

“He’s getting stronger!” Yu groaned.

The two Asura Frames guarded their Devicers from the supernatural destruction of the Doomsday Books with their anti-magic shells, but Agni’s mana continued to rise with no end in sight.

“Be careful, Yu!” Ein called out. “You’re still holding him off for now, but it won’t last. If you’re overpowered, you and Rudra might not make it!”

“Yeah, it’s looking a little dicey,” Yu said sorely. Sweat poured down his back. “I guess this means Leo’s the better Devicer.”

He couldn’t think of any other explanation. His defeat was literally creeping closer with every second, and with it his own demise. As well as the horrible truth that he wasn’t strong enough to protect everyone.

But right when the despair was about to consume him, Ein was there.

“No!” she declared. “You and Leo may have begun as equals, but in this moment I believe you to be the superior chosen. I would stake my royal blood on it!”

“You really think that?” Yu replied, unsure.

“I do. There’s more here than meets the eye.” Ein’s gasp came through the transmission. “Look at this, Yu. Rudra’s detected a strange kind of magic. But who cast it? And when?”

“You’re right.” A window appeared in the corner of his vision, presumably through Ein’s doing. She moved it to a more visible location. “‘Geas Curse’?”

“It’s a coercion spell. It allows the caster to force another to do, or not to do, anything the user wants,” Ein explained. “The target loses control of their emotions, sometimes falling into a comatose state, as they’re compelled to act against their own thoughts. It is a forbidden and highly taboo technique.”

“Wait, you don’t think…” Yu suddenly realized something. “Do you think that by making the Devicer’s emotions go berserk, the Asura Frame would start to go haywire too?”

“It’s plausible. Man and Asura are bound at a deeply fundamental level.”

Yu took a deep breath. A lot of things immediately made a lot of sense. Why Leo had gone crazy out of nowhere. All of Quldald’s suggestive comments.

“Either way, we can’t afford to lose here,” he stated with renewed vigor. “Rudra, we’re not going along with this tantrum anymore. Cut the Doomsday Book and channel all power to the shell. Everything to defense!”

“Is that a plan I hear you concocting?”

“It’s more of a gamble than a plan, but I’ve got to try something or it’s over. Figured I might trust you and give that confidence of yours a go!”

He would have never had the strength to make it through this on his own. But Devicer Three wasn’t alone. Together with his friends and the goddess of victory herself, Yu Ichinose prepared for the ultimate climax.

4

The Mark VII shined, radiant and blistering. The Asura given form inhabited the center of a sphere of heat with Yu and the Mark III enduring within its sweltering reach of over thirty meters. According to his sensors, the surface of the nano-armor had surpassed three thousand degrees Celsius. Although the interior was not so excruciatingly intense, it most certainly wasn’t comfortable, and Yu had to fight to keep from vomiting from the searing pain. Were it not for the anti-magic shell weakening the effect of Agni’s magic, he and the Frame would have long been reduced to a soup of atoms.

But staying alive was all Yu could realistically manage in this situation. Every bit of the Asura Frame’s energy was being poured into the shell and life support functions just to keep its Devicer alive.

“Spin, Agni! Turn! Unleash the Prayer Wheel!” Leo boomed. “Give me the power to crush everyone in my way!”

The boy sounded positively insane. More proof of Yu’s hunch.

“Just a little more,” he whispered to Rudra. “Just hang in there a little longer. It’s almost time.”

And then, more abruptly than he could have anticipated, the time came.

Leo recoiled in shock and barked at his Frame, “What are you doing?! The Wheel’s slowing down!”

“This is it!”

Yu watched the numbers on the data window drop in relief. It had been firmly at 90,000 prana per second for what felt like an eternity, but Agni’s magic output was finally beginning to fall—85,000, 60,000, 25,000, 10,000, 7,300…

Back at Nayuta, Yu had asked High Priestess Azalin, the supervisor for all Asura series Exo-Frame development, a question he’d never expected to find so relevant…

“Ein’s Gospel Codes give the Frame a huge boost in power, but is there any sort of limit to it?”

“That depends largely on the compatibility between Devicer and Asura Frame.” The cherubic woman had been a royal advisor long ago. When she spoke of topics such as this, though, her childlike eyes glistened with passion once again. “So it’s impossible to really give any sort of specific range, but in the event that one does surpass the limit, the Prayer Wheel will enter a dormant state. So be careful out there!”

“The Frame powers down?”

“Exactly! The safety mechanism will kick in to prevent overheating.”

Yu could all but hear her cheery, rhythmic cadence all over again. He never could have imagined such an innocuous interaction would one day be the key to his victory.

The Mark VII’s heat field gradually shrank, dissipating into the surrounding atmosphere without a source to fuel it, until it finally vanished entirely. Next, even the Asura’s avatar—the giant of light—disappeared as well. All that remained was the standard Photon-Frame and Leo staring down at his belt in dismay. His widened eyes were fixed on the slowly turning Prayer Wheel.

Yu didn’t hesitate. “Now, Rudra!”

He charged Devicer Seven faster than the wind. Placing his armored hands on the force field surrounding the boy, Yu once again activated the ultrasonic oscillator and the incapacitative paralytic sound propagator.

Leo shrieked and immediately lost consciousness.

“Rudra! Interface with the Mark VII’s intelligence and activate controlled flight! Life support functions to max!”

Leo was no friend of Yu’s. But unless he did something, the boy would have likely lost control and free-fallen all the way from the stratosphere. The Photon-Frame was supposedly linked with the user’s mental state, and it could weaken accordingly.

But just as Yu was basking in the solace of victory, a commlink came that made his stomach sink.

“Yu, I’m sorry! I really tried!” Natsuki shouted, frantic. “Three meteors got past me!”

“What?!”

“They haven’t landed yet, though! Can you help me clean them up?!”

“On it!”

Yu shot back down to Earth.

Natsuki controlled MUV Avatar: Vritra—the Mark VI’s incarnation in droid form—from a vacant lot in the northeast corner of Fukuoka. The flying saucer-shaped serpent shot down the storm of extraterrestrial rocks as they pierced the stratosphere, utilizing its entire suite of weaponry from photon lasers to supersonic missiles to high-powered particle cannons.

The Green Dragon Crescent Blade’s Prayer Wheel spun, singing the Traveler’s Hymn and supplying a constant flow of energy as Natsuki decimated the shower enough to allow nearly the entire barrage to burn to ash in the atmosphere. But it wasn’t enough.

“Gah, I can’t believe I missed three!”

Natsuki looked up at the sky in frustration. The stratosphere covered an area roughly between ten to fifty kilometers above sea level, and three fast-approaching asteroids had just broken through. They were now visible to the naked eye.

Ijuin looked up with her. “On one hand, this is kind of amazing to see, but on the other, we’re all totally gonna die!”

The falling masses of rock left trails of fire along their path over the Sea of Japan as they hurtled towards the city at a gruesome skew… They were clearly heading straight for northern Kyushu. And it was mere seconds before impact.

Natsuki, Ijuin, Executive Shiba, and Officer Kaji nodded to each other.

“All right!” the samurai girl cried. “I’m gonna head out and do the whole struggle in vain thing with Three while I still can!”

“Your attacks have definitely made them smaller,” Shiba said, slightly panicked. “They’ll only keep breaking apart as they fall. If you Devicers give it your all, there still might be a chance!”

“Oh, but if they blow up in the sky, we’ll still have the shock wave to deal with, just FYI!” Ijuin added.

“Aw, man,” Kaji moaned, clutching her head in anxiety. “I thought we were done when Three sorted Leo out, but now this! We’ve got to run for shelter!”

Natsuki regarded her with a sidelong glance as she swung the guandao Asura Frame. She floated up into the air and swiftly rose higher.

“Ein! The usual!”

“Understood. Fight well, Natsuki!”

The Replicant princess offered a prayer for victory as she transmitted the Gospel Code.

—The born that know not life live apart.
—And in death do we breathe while the mind clings on.
—Until death itself dies and we transcend beyond.

“Let’s go, Vritra! Doomsday Book part two!”

Natsuki thrust the Green Dragon forward and darted through the air. About a kilometer from the tip of the guandao was a meteor on a collision course with the ground, a burning fireball trailed by a line of smoke and light. Steadying her aim, Natsuki swung the Frame in a straight line, and a glowing edge shot towards the plunging rock. It instantly cut the burning mass clean in two as if slicing through paper.

And then, it stopped. Dead in the air. The smoke behind it froze, the light trapped in time. A black stain spread throughout the amputated fireball, even creeping along its white fumes. When the blackness consumed everything, it faded from existence.

Vritra’s Doomsday Book, chapter two—Karmic Break.

“A sword that can cut through causality itself, severing existence,” Natsuki muttered. “I think that’s what it is? Anyway, it lets me cut through anything, and that means one less space rock!”

While Natsuki celebrated her small victory, the Full-Armored Mark III was approaching yet another flaming meteor.

“Rudra! Ein! Deploy droids!” Yu commanded.

A swath of adaptive nanofactors spread out and transformed into five hundred MUV Crow Gauntlets, the clawed arms that the Mark III had equipped to itself. The arms rushed to the asteroid, keeping pace with its rapid descent, and covered it in a structured lattice of limbs. With a simultaneous attack of hundreds of electromagnetic heat radiators, the second meteor at last burst apart.

The shock wave displaced clouds for a hundred kilometers in every direction like the infrasonic blast of a volcanic eruption. Thankfully, however, it was still above the Sea of Japan, and only the abandoned Tsushima Archipelago sustained damages.

Only one meteor left. A young man shadowed the remaining target, watching alone from a single point in the sky.

“Now, heavenly blade. Fall.”

Quldald of the Whirlwind waved the magical artifact known as the Starcaller—and the earth exploded, violently and spectacularly. The third meteor crashed into Fukuoka.

Right on the reclaimed island by the sea where Natsuki had left the others.

5

When it landed, the meteor had been reduced in size by over three hundred meters in diameter. Shaved down by friction with the atmosphere and, more substantially, by MUV Avatar: Vritra. This was the one saving grace.

The explosion at Island City was massive and created powerful, devastating shock waves that extended all the way out to Kasuga and Koga on the outskirts of Fukuoka. Earth was swept up, buildings were shaken, and windows were shattered all throughout the blast zone. You’d have been lucky to find a single structure that hadn’t been damaged—granted, the vast majority of them were abandoned, so most civilians were unaffected.

The impact site was unrecognizable. The entire island on the eastern edge of Hakata Bay was gone, slightly changing the shoreline, but other than that, much of the geography had gone unaltered. Largely thanks to the fact that the meteor had been greatly reduced in size.

But the island itself was gone. And so was everything on it.

The Replicant princess closed her eyes upon hearing the news. Her memories of Param were vague and indistinct, but she knew who she had been. A warrior and queen. Her past self had been born into a martial way of life, and she had stood at the vanguard of many a battlefield. So death was not new to her.

With her eyelids shut, she paid her respects to the fallen and wished them well on their journey into the next life. Remembering that witnessing a

life taken too soon always hurt just a little bit more than she was prepared for…

Speaker Nadal heard the report with her, but there was little more he could say other than, “I see.”

The sage looked upwards. That day, he would utter not a single word more, utter not a single quip or complaint, until the sun rose on the next morning.

Takamaru Ijuin. Jurota Shiba. Kiriko Kaji. All three were missing. But all three had been on the island.

All three could only be dead.

When Leo woke up, he was slowly falling from the sky. Agni’s Photon-Frame was somehow still active, despite him having lost consciousness. The force field glistened around him as the antigravity lifters carried him to the ground.

“What…happened?” he murmured.

He’d been up in the stratosphere just moments before. But something had broken his self-control, and he’d turned against Nayuta’s Asura Frames. It could have only been the meddling of the archmage. The one he’d lost to. That was the most Leo could remember. And that was when he noticed the bay below him, tinted red by the setting sun. The island on its eastern end was gone. The rest of the scenery, too, looked somehow different from normal. Worn and buffeted.

“Kiriko, what happened? Kiriko?” He tried to raise his team member via commlink. Nothing. He couldn’t even trace her location. “Agni, what were Kiriko’s last known coordinates?”

A map appeared before him with the requested data. The marker was on Island City. Or what *used* to be Island City, that is.

“What the hell happened while I was out, Agni?!”

A video played. Leo watched every second of it. And then he sped off.

The impact site was just part of the bay now, a dark splotch of water and sediment from the reclaimed island. Any sort of crater must have been left on the ocean floor.

A new map with new markers appeared. Agni had picked up the signals of other Asuras. The Mark III and the Mark VI. Leo immediately raced towards them. He had to know what he’d done. The damage he had caused.

He found them in a soccer field not far from the missing island. Devicer Three and the red-haired girl with the guandao stood among the wild and unkempt weeds, together with one other man. The archmage dressed in blue.

“You!” Leo snarled. He landed on the turf and pointed his finger at the man—Quldald of the Whirlwind, he had called himself on their first meeting. A photon laser pierced the mage’s chest.

But he merely smiled at the menacing boy. “Greetings. My apologies for today.”

Leo glanced at the spell detection alert and gritted his teeth. “Illusion magic.”

“Forgive me my mischief,” Quldald said jovially. “I simply thought it fitting for the heroes of vajra to be matched with another of equal…radiance, shall we say. But alas, I do always find it difficult to play the spectator and thought to deliver the final blow myself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Leo growled.

Devicer Three was as stoic as the suit of armor adorning them. Any expression they may have been making was obscured by their mask. The red-haired girl, however, had her gaze fixed on the archmage, her eyes filled with powerful tranquility, her emotions unreadable. But Leo knew that look. The coldness. The intensity. She wanted blood. It was more than hatred. More than rage. She looked at the man with a calm fury and the calculated desire to wipe him from existence, then and there.

And the otherworldly sorcerer took it in stride. “The battle this day was born of a whim, you see. To send my forces along with the stars would have been utterly distasteful, don’t you agree? No, it had to be from the heavens. So I bid the last of the storm myself to crush the seat of command you heroes had created.” Quldald spoke of the disaster as if it were all a game. He looked *satisfied* with what he had done. “Ah, it is a fulfilling thing to see a plan come to fruition, at least at the very end. Though I was on tenterhooks for a moment there!”

“‘Seat of command’?” Leo repeated. He quickly realized what the mage had meant. It was where Kiriko had been. Where the others from Nayuta had likely been. The island that was no more. Leo shook with a strange, new kind of anger. “You…”

A curse almost left his lips, but he stopped. This was all his fault. If he hadn’t been under the archmage’s spell, they would have easily taken care of the meteors. He was in no place to pretend to be righteous.

Leo clenched his hands into fists until his nails drew blood. But it wasn’t enough.

For so long, the only things he hated had been the things around him. The world. Bootlickers. All his negativity had been directed outwards. But now Leo only hated himself.

“Now then.” The mage held up the small, wand-like staff in his hand. “I believe this marks the end of my special tool.”

Kiriko had written about it in her battle strategy earlier. It could have only been the Starcaller.

Quldald tossed it forward, and as if transported by some kind of magic, it fell on the grass directly in front of them. It was gray like ash, and a moment later, it disintegrated into ash itself.

“How strange that I feel so chipper, despite the shameful waste of such a priceless artifact. Oh, how I live for our battles!” And then Quldald’s image vanished with the wind. “When next we meet, it shall be in the flesh! You have my word!”

The field fell silent. Only the Devicers remained—Three, Six, and Seven. No one said a word. Many seconds passed before someone finally broke the quiet.

“Someone hit me, dammit!” Leo screamed. “I’ll never forgive myself. Hit me, beat me, kill me! I know you want to! Your friends are dead because of me!”

“No!” Three shouted back. They swung their arm to the side, slamming it against a nearby light pole. It cut right through, the vibroblade switching on in the Devicer’s rage, and it crashed down like a tree. “We don’t...fight...each other!” Three’s voice shook. “I fight for *everyone*. Even the man who killed my best friend. So watch for me. I’ll be there if you’re ever in trouble.”

Devicer Three wasn’t speaking in theatrics right now. Their words weren’t fake. They trudged across the soccer field, and they didn’t look back.

Someone was waiting for them just on the edge of the turf. The Replicant girl. Clothed again. She ran to the Devicer and held them in her arms. Leo recalled that her name was Ein. On any other day, the sight of the two of them would have filled him with disgust. He would have called Devicer Three weak for showing such vulnerability. He would have considered the elf girl patronizing, insincere.

But on *this* day, Leo found himself filled with nothing but self-loathing.

“Hey. Tough Guy.” The red-haired girl—Natsuki Hatano, Leo vaguely remembered—spoke up. There was no more fury in her eyes. They were gentle. At peace. “Kaji talked about you, you know. She told me she saw good in you at times. Little things, I guess... I really don’t care how you plan to live with yourself from now on, but I hope you’ll think of her every now and then.”

And then she left.

Leo stood on the field alone. Fists clenched. Bleeding.

Epilogue

1

"Wha…?"

Takamaru Ijuin opened his eyes in an unfamiliar room. It seemed to be an infirmary, wherever it was, and there were several other beds besides his own. Bottles and jars of medical supplies filled the cabinets.

Ijuin struggled to dispel the fog in his mind. "How…did I get here?"

He glanced around from his bed. His clothes had been replaced with a beige patient gown. In the beds directly next to his, he recognized Executive Officer Jurota Shiba and the officer from Fukuoka, Kiriko Kaji. They were still fast asleep.

He pulled himself up and stumbled over to the window. "The ocean?!"

Blue stretched out in every direction. They were on a boat, and a fast one by the looks of it. What in the world had happened?

"Ah, you're up. I'm on my way."

Ijuin jumped at the sudden commlink. He'd heard that voice somewhere. But he didn't recall accepting any connection with her.

Did she do something to us in our sleep? he wondered.

He remembered now. They had been on the sidelines, backing up the Asura Frames, when she'd appeared out of nowhere…

"I'll accept my thanks later," she had said. "For now, let's keep this brief. I'm here to rescue you, so don't resist and try not to be a restless sleeper while I'm carrying you. Thank you, good night."

"And then she slapped us with sleeping gas!"

The most he knew was that it had been a girl. He hadn't seen her face beneath that metallic blue armor. It wasn't hard to identify the variety of Exo-Frame it had been, though, based on the buttery smooth landing. Flight powered by anti-gravity lifters was easy to spot. And then she'd pointed her finger at Ijuin and the others and blasted them with smoke, knocking everyone out cold.

"It had to be the Mark V! Meaning that chick must be with the Chinese military."

"'That chick' has a name." The door to the infirmary opened and in came a girl speaking fluent Japanese. Ijuin whipped around and nearly flinched at her dainty beauty and flowing black hair which waved behind her as she came right up to him. "That's Zhou Xueli to you. Allow me to explain your situation so you know what you'll be thanking me for."

"S-Situation?" Ijuin stuttered, stunned by her looks. "What situation?"

She looked older than him, and the leather military jacket she wore was awfully intimidating, but beneath it she only had on a pink hoodie and black tights.

"I noticed a bit of a crisis unfolding in Kyushu during a rare break in my exceedingly busy schedule," Xueli gloated. "So I came running. And who do

I find but a trio of potential victims of a deadly meteor collision in need of rescuing? Which I did, by the way. This makes me, Zhou Xueli, your savior."

"Okay?" Ijuin recoiled. "Wait, we almost died?!"

"Very much so, yes. Now if you'd be so kind as to express your gratitude with more than words, I have an idea." Xueli stood straight and tall. "I'm looking for valuable personnel, you see, and it can only be fate that I've come upon not one but *two* individuals gifted with nano-augmentations! Join me! You'll be most welcome as members of my support staff!"

"Uh, no? Can you take us back to Japan, please?!"

"*Japan*? The country formerly known as Japan collapsed months ago, and we're already well on our way to Shanghai. Give it some thought, won't you? It's not a bad offer."

"You literally kidnapped us!"

The ship they were on was apparently a Chinese destroyer, but as far as Ijuin was concerned, the only thing being destroyed was his sanity.

2

Castle Whirlwind, the keep of Quldald of the Whirlwind—Chosen Dharva, master of the wind, and handsome general of otherworldly armies. He stood in his chamber among the flickering flames of numerous candles, a white mask in hand. It was a simple piece, unadorned except for two drawn-on eyes.

The archmage put it on and uttered a single word: "Armorize."

His white robes at once began to change. Brass-colored armor covered him from head to toe, but this suit wasn't made of traditional plates. It fit the wearer's form snugly, more like metal-coated clothing than anything else.

In fact, it greatly resembled the Asura Frames worn by the heroes of Earth.

Quldald wanted to replicate that very aegis. And so he had commissioned the fae blacksmiths to do just that, integrating all manner of rare charms and artifacts into the design. Again, much in the same way the Asuras had been created.

Yet the result was strangely aberrant.

"Perfect," Quldald moaned. He chuckled, admiring himself in the mirror.

The white mask concealing his face was unchanged, but it was interposed by two smaller, entirely new masks where his ears would be. Two burly, metallic arms extended from each shoulder, and two more thinner arms had grown from either flank, all freely motile. He put all six of his hands together to form a mudra sign in front of his gut.

It was the very image of the legendary, three-headed, six-armed Buddha.

"Devicers of Earth. Now I, too, have become one with vajra. The time of our climax is nigh!"

The true purpose of sending the stars down had been to buy time for this very creation. And now that it was complete, Quldald regarded his new godhood with delight.

Afterword

Well, it's been a long time. Like, er, a *really* long time since the last volume. Needless to say, this series has had a few extenuating circumstances, not the least of which being a string of bad luck pushing this volume back a whole six months after the draft's completion (an entire *year* after the release of volume one). By the time it came time to proofread it, I'd completely forgotten what I'd even written.

Normally, what we'd do in this situation here at MF Bunko J is walk on up to the brand new head editor and toss them a good old fashioned "I told you so," but it's a little hard to do that with COVID still in full swing in Japan. It's all masks everywhere and having face-to-face meetings is next to impossible these days. So, as sad as it is, making such snide remarks is beyond my capabilities.

On that note, it's been about a year now since the pandemic started. And some countries have already made progress in suppressing the spread of disease through lockdowns supported by economic assistance, expanded testing, and swift, efficient vaccine distribution. Of course, as new variants emerge, it's entirely possible that we'll need completely new preventative measures, but the parallels between the present state of the real world and the world within *Fantasy Inbound* are not lost on me. Frankly, it shocks even myself, and I'm supposed to be the author.

You may recall me writing in the afterword of volume one that the original pitch for this series was a big, dramatic action-fest with one crazy set piece after the next. Funny how things work out.

At any rate, volume three has finally been published. I greatly hope you enjoyed it.

FANTASY INBOUND

03

Starcaller

JOE TAKEDUKI

《ILLUST.》 SHIRABII

NAME
Zhou Xueli
DATA
A member of a special nano-unit in the Chinese navy. Devicer of the Mark V Asura Frame, Varuna. Unsatisfied with simply achieving the rank of lieutenant commander at just seventeen, she comes to Al'iksir in search of yet more power.
Mantra Server Startup Complete.
NAME
Shanti
DATA
An Indonesian girl living in Jakarta and a total idol fangirl. Invited to Al'iksir on account of her high nano-fitness.

Translator Notes

Well. Here you are. You arrive at the end of the novel, curious as to what this section could be about. “Translator notes?” you wonder to yourself. “Whatever could that be?”

Or you’re a veteran and you’ve already read my last two segments, in which case you’re probably thinking, “God, here we go again. This guy sure does like to ramble on about nothing as if he’s paid by the word or something.”

I’m not, actually. Rest assured that I do this purely of my own free will, for my own personal amusement.

Now that my masochism has been established, maybe I should start the actual intro. Hey, I’m Matt, the translator for *Fantasy Inbound*, and I’m the guy who researches ancient, untranslated Buddhist mantras and studies classical Japanese just to decipher tiny passages. This is the part of the book where I take you through a bit of my process and share some of the interesting tidbits that I learned on my journey through translating this series. This time around, I’m gonna be talking a bit more about the devas and prominent figures in Hindu mythology that the Asura Frames are named after (seeing as we’ve got a whole bunch of them now), so we’re in for a bit more of a cultural dive than a linguistic one.

So let’s just get right into it. As a reminder, of course, I like to preface these portions with a disclaimer that the purpose of this is mainly to highlight the inspirations that this series draws from. I’m by no means an authority on these cultures, so this isn’t to be taken as any sort of academic breakdown, and mistakes or misinterpretations could very well be made. Just know that the point of this section is to share and highlight, not to educate, because this is most certainly not my field to teach.

Mitra

Seeing as I already addressed Rudra back in volume one, let’s start with the Mark IV, Mitra. In *Fantasy Inbound*, Mitra is the Asura Frame that focuses primarily on land combat, but that’s just about all we know of him right now. In Hinduism, Mitra is a deva in the Rigveda (one of the religion’s holy texts), and *sort of* like how Rudra and Shiva are correlated, so too is Mitra with Varuna. But also, I lied. Both Mitra and Varuna are technically asuras who are *referred to* as devas. See why this is complicated?

I’ll save the Mitra-Varuna dynamic for when we cover Varuna himself, but it’s worth mentioning that they’re so intertwined, it’s a little hard to talk about one without the other. In any case, the word “mitra” roughly means “ally” or “friend,” and as such Mitra is commonly known as the god of friendship. By extension, he’s also connected with oaths and covenants. And lastly, Mitra is considered to be the bringer of light. Not necessarily the sun itself, which is an important distinction, but he’s strongly associated with

the sunrise and sunlight—something distinct from Varuna, who more so deals with the metaphysical nature of things.

Varuna

While Mitra is considered to be the guardian of human order (extending from his connection with camaraderie and oaths), Varuna is the cosmic side of that same coin. The etymology of the name points to the Sanskrit word meaning “to surround,” possibly insinuating a connection to the cosmos surrounding the world. While Varuna is associated with the skies—and, notably, the oceans to an extent, which is the Mark V’s domain—he is also called the king of the universe, enforcing morality and punishing sinners.

Much of Varuna—and by extension the Mitra-Varuna duality—is quite similar to Rudra and his twin, Shiva. A lot of that overlap goes way back to ancient times and encompasses a lot of ancient Vedic texts that are beyond my understanding, but it is worth mentioning that the two of them resemble each other. Just as Mitra-Varuna is sort of a vague combination, the line blurred between one and the other, so is Rudra-Shiva. The one major distinction I, myself, have noticed is the fact that Mitra-Varuna seems to be deeply important to order in both the human and the cosmic world.

Once upon a time, Varuna seemed to be pretty much the top dog as far as deities went. Nowadays, though, that title goes to Indra.

Vritra

The next Asura Frame on the list is the Mark VI, the Dragon King. If you’ve been sitting here this whole time shaking your head going, “These connections to the roles of the Asura Frames seem flimsy at best,” then don’t worry. While Vedic gods are complex and won’t fit into neat roles as if they were members of the Greek pantheon—that’s fairly Western-centric thinking—this is the Frame to sate your metaphorical appetite.

Vritra (also spelled “Vrtra”) is absolutely, no question, a true asura if ever there was one. It might even be the first Asura Frame that isn’t even remotely a deva. He’s also a dragon, serpent thing. You know, one of those ancient reptiles that every culture has but no one can really agree on how much snake and how much lizard the recipe calls for. The story of Vritra tells that he once hoarded the waters of the world, blocking rivers and streams, until Indra showed up and defeated him after chugging a whole bunch of soma, a special drink in Hindu legend (don’t worry, we’ll get to that).

That is, of course, the heavily summarized version. Although this story has changed a lot over the ages, Vritra continues to be a symbol of evil, drought, and the asuras as a whole.

Agni

Ah, Agni. The Mark VII, piloted by my favorite edgelord. Out of all the Asura Frames so far, this is probably the one with the most recognizable

name. Presumably, that's because the word "agni" is literally just the Sanskrit word for "fire," so it gets used in many contexts. Such as a traditional system of ritualistic dueling in a cartoon nation that once attacked and changed everything. Just as a totally hypothetical example.

Anyway, Agni the *god* is (gasp) the god of fire. And he takes on the forms of literal fire, lightning, the sun itself, and pretty much anything else that's hot. As tends to be the case with most of human civilization, fire holds a lot of significance in Hinduism, being used in many rituals and rites. Thus, Agni serves as witness, and sometimes a messenger. Given his role in so many aspects of Hindu life, from marriage to birth to death, he represents many things, not least of all the concept of change. He's so important, in fact, that he's probably second only to Indra.

Needless to say, the Mark VII certainly lives up to its namesake. The fact that it's the first Frame we see without, well, an actual Frame might be a subtle nod to the fact that Agni has become more of an intangible concept and symbol over time. Or maybe it's just because it looks cool.

Soma

So that covers all the big Asura Frames. Up next is the Mark VIII, Soma, who we saw very little of this volume. There aren't many connections we can make with its real-world counterpart, but let's talk about it anyway.

First, a disclaimer. There are technically three somas, and no, it's totally not linguistically confusing at all, no way. As I mentioned before, soma is a drink in Hindu mythology, and consuming it makes the drinker immortal. The gods in particular enjoyed it a whole lot, like I mentioned before with Indra downing a bunch before slaying Vritra. More relevant to us, though, is Soma, capital 's'—the god. His more common name is Chandra, but in later texts, people start calling him after the plant of the same name—the very plant used in the creation of the *drink*. So we've got the drink, the plant used in the drink, and the god named after the drink, all named "soma."

Okay, so, etymology aside... Chandra—or Soma, which I'll be using from here on out—is the god of the moon, though this came later and is, to my knowledge, kind of complicated. Soma actually began as the god of vegetation, which is fitting considering the plant-based beverage he's named after. He's also associated with health and prosperity and is occasionally revered as supreme to all other deities.

To elaborate a bit more on the moon side of things, "chandra" is the Sanskrit word for it, so the confusion kind of comes from the fact that Chandra the god later began to also be called Soma. Regardless, learning this suddenly made the title of the first chapter—Waves Under the Moon—make a lot more sense to me.

Virochana

The last of the Asura Frames left to us is the Mark IX, Virochana. And this one is unique, because Virochana is not a deva, or a big scary dragon

asura like Vritra. Now, there's a whole story and genealogy to Virochana that I won't bother to recite, because it's long and honestly kind of confusing out of context, so I'll summarize instead.

Virochana was the son of an asura king, and he once studied the concept of the self under Prajapati (a Vedic god) with Indra, who you'll recall is kind of the top deva. But Virochana misunderstood the teachings and taught the asuras, incorrectly, that the body was the true self—or the atman as they call it—a belief that they would continue to hold. Ultimately, Indra would later be forced to kill him, as Virochana's devotion to Lord Vishnu outweighed his reverence for the devas.

This is a gross oversimplification, of course, but I think it's a rather fitting allusion for the Asura Frame who essentially monitors all the other Asuras. Almost like a king, huh? Of the asuras. Weird.

The Draco Blade Gospel Code

No TL note afterword for *Fantasy Inbound* would be complete without a multipage dive into one of the Gospel Codes. Honestly, I went back and forth quite a bit on what to highlight in this volume because the Pandemonium Gospel is hard to top. Nothing's really cost me literal days of thought since. But I wanted to include something here, of course, so I figured why not give the spotlight to something that's not from the first volume for once?

Thus I present to you the Draco Blade Gospel Code—the Gospel used by Natsuki against Quldald when he gets up in everyone's business back in Tokushima. This passage comes from a quote said to have been spoken by the Buddhist monk Mugaku Sogen (also known as Wuxue Zuyuan) moments before a Yuan soldier threatened to decapitate him. Legend has it the soldier was so moved that he spared Sogen's life.

—No earth nor heaven upon which to stand.

This is the translation of the first half of the first line of the Gospel Code, which reads: □□□□□□□□□□□□□(*Kenkon, kojou wo tateru chi nashi*—if anyone out there reads Japanese, saw this, and had a panic attack because you couldn't figure out how to pronounce these kanji from hell, don't worry. I did too.)

Literally, what this line is saying is, "No land in all the universe upon which to plant a staff." Simple enough. I only shifted the phrasing slightly to fit the tone a little better. Things only start to get complicated from here on out...

—Joy, as fleeting as the life and dharma for which we exist.

This translation is the spawn of the second half of the first line: □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□ (*Shaki suraku ninkuu, hou mo mata kuu nari*—someone crucify me if I'm reading the □ wrong.)

The bare-bones components of this would roughly translate to: "To feel joy is empty, just as the teachings of Buddha are empty." Side note, that's also what "dharma" means. Simply the teachings of Buddha.

—Hark, for the Yuan's sword is but a lightning's shade when it sunders the spring breeze.

Moving right along, this line is a translation of: □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (*Chinchousu, daigensanjaku no ken. Denkoueiri, shunpuu wo kiru*—this one's a doozy.) Broken down, this literally means: "The prized longsword of the Great Yuan. Like the flash of lightning, it cuts the spring breeze."

Now, the reason I wanted to get the entire passage cleared away is because what's important here are the things not being said. The message between the lines that *my* translation might not reproduce quite as eloquently, given the context that I created it in. Also, it's just a lot more interesting than explaining my process this time, because unlike the other Gospel Codes, I don't have literal paragraphs of notes about why I translated it the way I did.

So in the *original* context, what is it saying? Starting at the beginning, Sogen's literally about to have his head chopped off, and the first thing he utters is basically, "There is nothing for me." But this is not a cry of despair. Sogen goes on to say that there has never been anything—joy is fleeting, and even dharma, Buddha's doctrines, are impermanent. So what does he conclude? "That's a mighty fine sword you have. Too bad nothing matters. You could kill me faster than a lightning strike and you might as well be cutting through a cool spring breeze."

And the best part is that the soldier is stunned. Sogen demonstrates perfect understanding of a very specific, Buddhism-branded nihilism that the concept of sunyata represents. While Sogen was a Zen Buddhist and it's beyond my knowledge whether they study sunyata in the same way that Mahayana Buddhism does, I find the connection rather fitting. Many of the Gospel Codes call back to this idea, that everything is empty and fleeting, but in that emptiness is infinite potential. If Sogen's head were to come flying off in that moment, it would have only been one of an infinite number of things that might have happened, and the guy made his peace with that.

In that sense, maybe the ADAMAS nanomachines are kind of a metaphor for sunyata themselves. At once formless yet imbued with the power to be anything. Nothing yet everything. Food for thought.

Now comes the part where I try to tie everything back around into a nice message about the work my peers and I do. Well, I *did* have one. But then I spent like twelve hours researching and refreshing myself on half a dozen

Vedic gods and legends… Listen, we can’t all be perfect, okay? That’s the lesson.

I know this is a bit shorter than usual, but I’m not really one to drag something on for longer than it needs to be. Never once have I elongated my thoughts and discussion with lengthy and verbose non sequiturs that have only tangential relevance to the topic at hand.

Anyway, I hope you’ve come out of this having learned something. The longer I translate this series, the deeper down the rabbit hole I go, and the more respect I find for how insanely complex and rich these cultures are. I’m positive I’m not doing them justice in these writings. Still, though, I feel privileged to work on something that’s been this educational, which isn’t always something you get to say in this line of work. There are still a lot of little things I haven’t even touched on, tiny references all piled up in my list of allusions (yeah, I’ve got one of those) that didn’t quite fit here, and maybe I’ll get the chance to share those with you when volume four finally sees the light of day.

Until then, though, I thank you for indulging my ramblings, and I thank all the staff and folks who helped my single brain cell piece all this together along the way. Remember: be like Sogen. Vibe so hard that not even the fine edge of a Yuan blade can spoil your mood.

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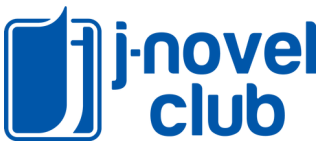

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Fantasy Inbound: Volume 3
by Joe Takeduki
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Edited by Callum May

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